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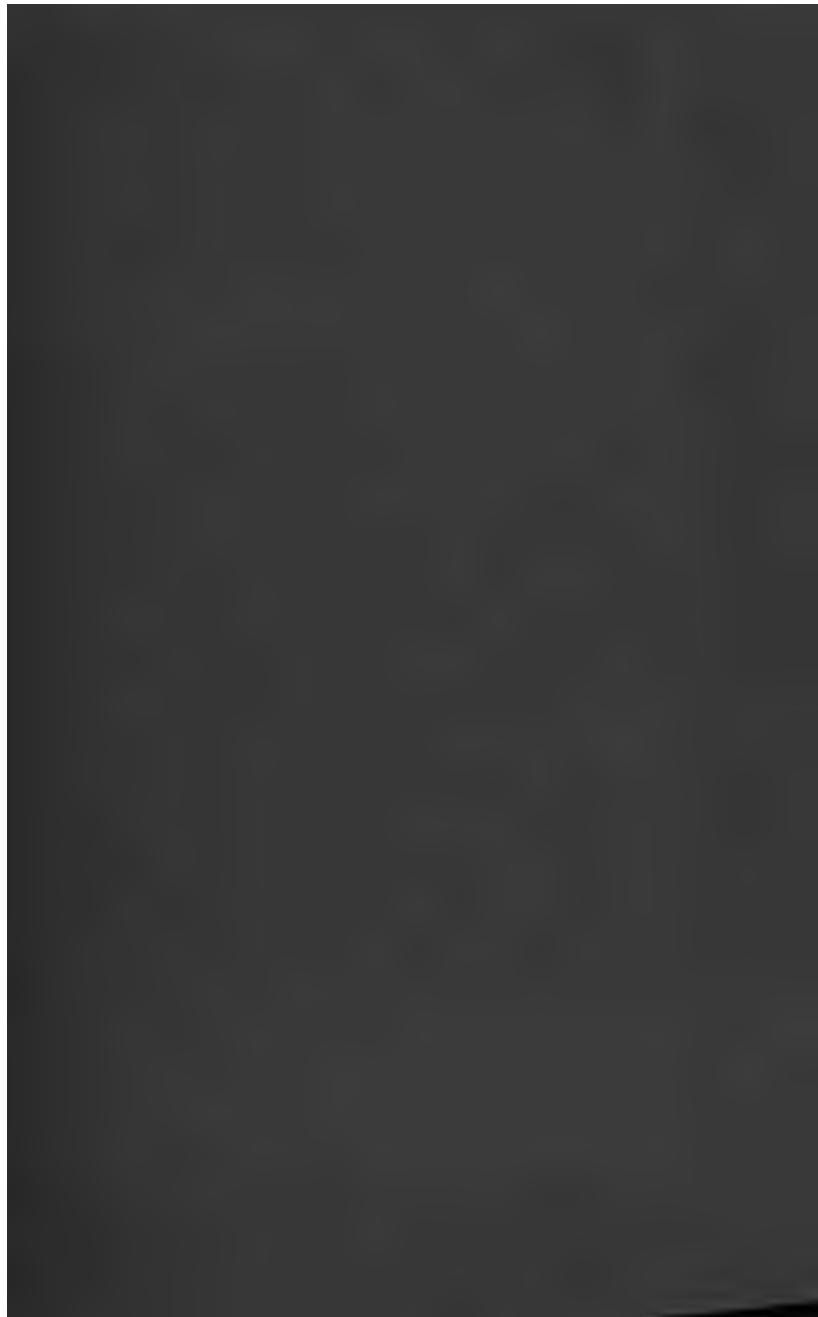
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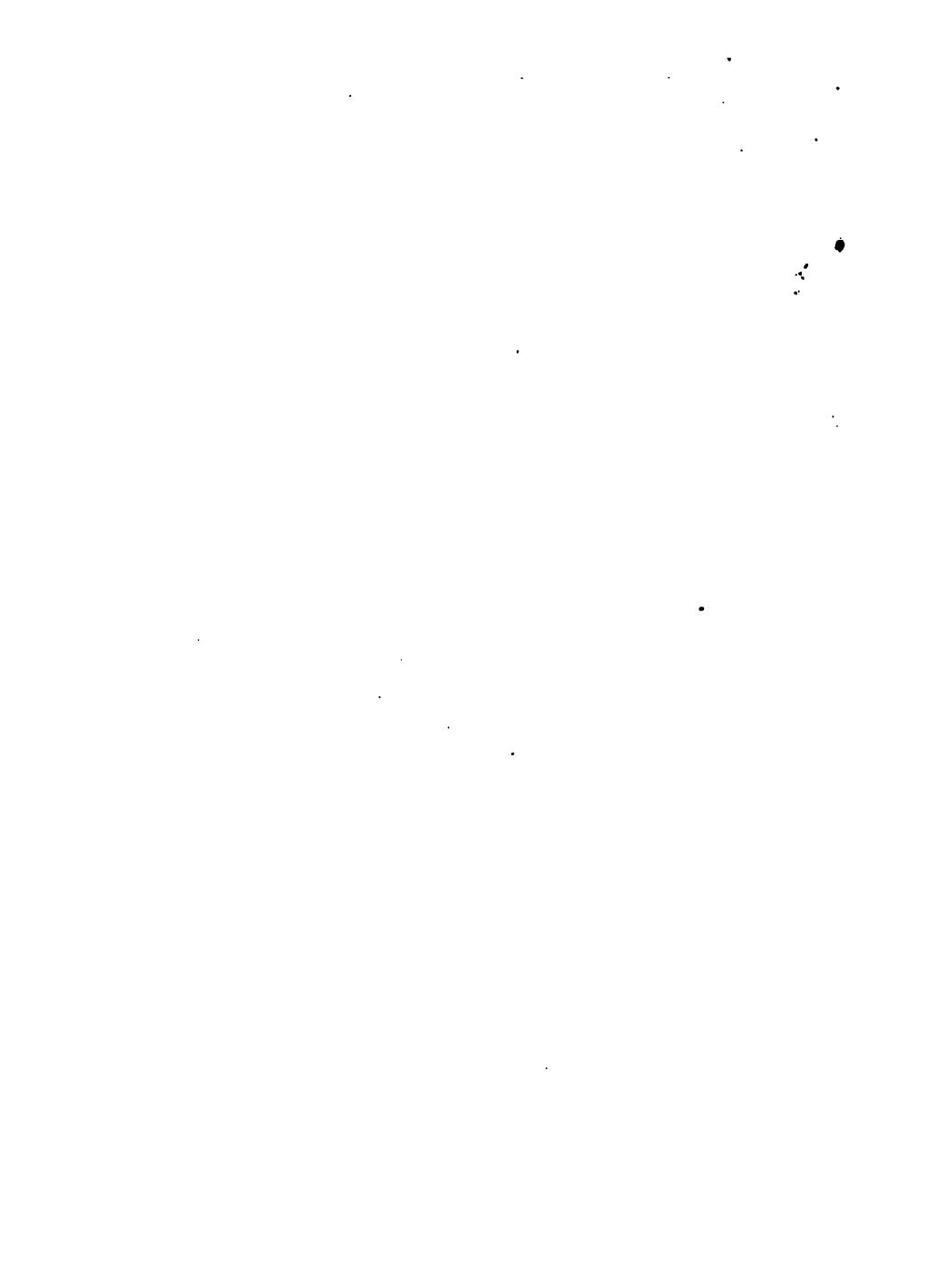














S T O R Y
OF
B E T H L E H E M.

A Book for the Young.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MORNING AND NIGHT WATCHES," "FOOTSTEPS OF ST PAUL,"
"MEMORIES OF BETHANY," "FAITHFUL PROMISER,"
ETC. ETC.

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STORY OF BETHLEHEM.

I AM going to write you a story: not about a great city, with towers, and temples, and palaces, but about a little town or village, perched like a bird's nest among the green hills of Palestine. It was built, with a wall all round it, on a ridge of limestone rock, which, from a distance, was very white to look upon. A few palm trees and a well were at its gate.

Long ago, the slopes of the valley, which lay on its northern side, were covered with terraces and vineyards. Here and there towers were erected, in which watchmen were placed at the time the grapes were ripe, to prevent them being stolen, and to drive away the "little foxes" that used to come at night and tear down the purple clusters.

All along these slopes, too, and in the fields and meadows below, flowers were to be seen—wild

daisies and anemones, water-lilies, tulips, and poppies, and a white one more common than the others, called, from the place whose story I am going to write, *the star of BETHLEHEM*.

You can think of many Hebrew children, three thousand years ago, going with baskets in their hands to this beautiful carpet of flowers, and plucking them, just as children love to do still. Sheep, too, browsed on these green slopes, and reapers in their season were seen in the corn fields. Tiny streams sang their sweet song, as they leapt from rock to rock in their way to the valley. Under the bright summer sky the wild bee was heard murmuring from flower to flower, and then winging its way back, with the stores it had gathered, to its rocky home in the sides of the mountain.

From BETHLEHEM itself a striking view was to be seen on all sides. The roofs of its houses were flat; and often, I doubt not, fathers and mothers would go with their children to the top of their dwellings to enjoy the prospect. Below they would see the valley of which I have spoken, with its sheep, and its streams, and its corn-fields. Six miles further off was the great city of Jeru-

salem, with its beautiful temple, which every Hebrew loved so much ; but the hills between hid it out from view. To the left, green mountains rose one above another. On the slope of one of these was a solitary pillar, which had a history dear to every Israelite. It marked the spot where little Benjamin was born, and where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, died and was buried. The view to the right was grander still. Deep down among the wild hills the waters of the Dead Sea glittered in the sunshine. Often, I daresay, as they pointed to it, would the parents of Bethlehem tell their children the dreadful story of the cities of the Plain—how God rained fire and brimstone upon them from heaven on account of their sin.

On the other side of the Dead Sea, and stretching a long way to the north, was a curious range of red and gray mountains, of which you will often afterwards hear in the course of this book. In that clear bright eastern sky they appear from Bethlehem to be very near, though in reality they are far away. Shall I tell you the name of these wonderful hills ? They are the hills of Moab. It was from one of their ridges that Abraham

must have got his first view of the Land of Promise, in journeying from Mesopotamia. To another of their tops Moses went up before he died, to get a view of the Land of Promise, which God did not allow him to enter; and in one of their deep ravines he was buried. It was on another summit that Balaam stood with Balak and his warrior princes. I think I see the smoke of the sacrifices rising up into the calm blue heavens from the seven altars they had built "on the top of the rocks." Balaam gazed down from that dizzy height on the hosts of Israel encamped amid the acacia groves in the plain below. He saw their beautiful tabernacle, and the great cloudy pillar spread over them like the shield of God. He could not help blessing the "goodly tents of Jacob," which Balak wished him to curse. Then, as he looked across towards the Land of Promise, he prophesied of "a STAR" that would yet "come out of Jacob." Fourteen hundred years after Balaam was in his grave, we shall find, in an after chapter, that Star shining brightly above the valley and village of BETHLEHEM!

I may just add, that these Moab mountains are remarkably high and steep. When deep

shadows are falling upon them, or clouds are resting in their hollows, they look gloomy and grand. They are not rugged at the top, but present to the eye an even line, like a huge wall built by giants. No wonder that some of the ignorant people in Palestine thought them to be the end of the world !







W. THOMAS

CHAPTER I.

STORY OF THE FAMINE.

I CANNOT exactly tell you the year, but somewhere between the time when Gideon and good old Eli governed the land of Israel, there lived in the village of BETHLEHEM a man named Elimelech. His wife's name was Naomi, and they had two sons called Mahlon and Chilion.

Elimelech and Naomi all at once became very sad. God had sent a famine into the land. There had been no corn in the fields to cut down, —a worm had blighted it, or the rains had rotted it. The sickles hung rusting on the walls. The barns and granaries were empty. The little children were crying in their houses and in the streets for bread, and their parents had none to give them.

The famine seems to have been as bad in Bethlehem as in any other part of Palestine.

The name "*Bethlehem*" means in Hebrew "*House of Bread*." But it was no longer so now. It was a house of want and starvation. Many lay down on their pillows at night wondering how they would live through the morrow.

Perhaps as Elimelech and his wife looked at their two dear boys, they saw their cheeks getting thin and wasted with hunger. If there was a little food that still could be procured, it was very costly; and probably Elimelech was poor, and had no money to buy it.

"What shall we do?" we may imagine them saying to one another, with the tears filling their eyes. "Can we allow our children to lie down and die? We cannot remain in Bethlehem. Can we not go somewhere else where there is no famine, and where we may get food, and save ourselves from starvation?"

Now, do you think they should have spoken thus? No; they ought to have trusted in God as the other villagers did, and He would have provided for them. Elimelech should have thought upon what his own name meant—"My God is King." He should have called to mind how this great "God and King" fed His people

Israel with manna from heaven for forty years in a howling desert.

Do you remember one of God's promises to those who trust in Him? "*Their bread shall be given*" (Isa. xxxiii. 16).

But Elimelech and his wife for the moment lost sight of God and His promises, and determine to leave their home in Bethlehem when the morrow's sun rose.

Where are they to go? As they looked all round, wondering what place would be best, their eye lighted on that dark gray mountain-wall of Moab, of which I have spoken, on the other side of the Dead Sea. Elimelech had doubtless heard a great deal about the rich corn-fields and fruitful valleys at the foot of these mountains. They were more fertile than anything that could be seen in the land of Canaan. Thither accordingly, taking his staff in his hand, and with his wife and his two sons by his side, he resolves to bend his steps.

The four travellers wend their way across the green table-lands that lay between them and this strange country. I cannot help thinking that Elimelech and Naomi must have often stopped

and looked behind with sorrowful hearts on their happy home.

Yes! and more than this, I am sure a voice within them must have every now and then been heard saying, "You do very wrong in thus fleeing from the land of Israel, and not trusting that Great and Good God who has been hitherto so kind to you." I wish, as they passed through the valley of Bethlehem, that they had listened to words sung by one who played on his harp in after years on these same grassy slopes,—"Trust in the Lord and do good: so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed" (Ps. xxxvii. 3).

But distrust of God was not their only sin. They were leaving the land where the God of their Fathers, the only living and true God, was worshipped, for a dark land of idolatry. What signified how fruitful and lovely these valleys of Moab were—how rich the corn-fields and glorious the mountains! Idol gods and Temples were set up amid these gray rocks, and they could not be happy when they thought, "We have left the land where the God of our Fathers dwells." *Chemosh* was the principal god of Moab. A cruel and

bloodthirsty Idol he must have been, for we afterwards read of one of the Kings of Moab burning his little son to death to please him (2 Kings iii. 27).

I have no doubt, then, it would be with sad hearts that Elimelech and his wife, as they passed through this heathen country, gazed on the temples of Chemosh, with the black star on the front of them, and saw the poor Moabites falling down and worshipping the senseless idol with their heads and feet bare. We can never be happy, dear young friends, in going where God is not. Better the hard crust of bread and the poorest hovel *with* God, than a palace and a royal table *without* Him.

I should tell you still further, before proceeding with the story, that it was not at all times people from the land of Israel could venture to cross the Jordan or the Dead Sea, and go to the opposite kingdoms. The Moabites, and especially the Amorites, who had seized a large portion of the country of Moab, were old enemies to the Hebrews.* I daresay Elimelech used often to take

* The Israelites were forbidden to "distress" the Moabites, because they were "the children of Lot" (Deut. ii. 9).

his boys on his knee at Bethlehem, and as he pointed to the black mountains beyond, would tell them about the fierce-looking warriors that dwelt there—giants in stature, with their glittering coats of mail, and of their terrible conflict with the Israelites when they had just come out of the desert of Arabia, and were about to enter the promised land. I think the hearts of the two young travellers especially, must have trembled as they passed the great castles and towers of king Sihon, “fenced with high walls, gates, and bars” (Deut. iii. 5). He had built them far up on the heights of these valleys, so that when an enemy came to invade his land, his soldiers could hurl down stones, arrows, and spears upon them.

In other respects, the country of Moab would remind the exiles much of their own mountain-home at Bethlehem. The vine would be seen creeping up the rocks ; the fig was there of enormous size, with its broad leaf ; the olive with its silver lining and twisted stem ; here and there the pomegranate with its scarlet blossoms ; vast forests of sycamore, beech, and terebinth, clothed the hill sides. The eagle, every now and

then, rose from his kingly nest on the heights. Herds of cattle, "bulls of Bashan," similar to those which Moses took as spoil from the king of Moab, browsed on the lower pastures ; while thousands of sheep, far more than they ever saw in Canaan, were dotted over the sides of the mountains ; the lambs rushing to their mothers for protection as they were startled by the footsteps of the passing travellers. It shews how rich these kings of Moab were in herds and flocks, when we read of one of them in after times, sending as a tax or tribute to the king of Israel, no less than "a hundred thousand lambs, and a hundred thousand rams with the wool" (2 Kings iii. 4).

You will wonder how it fared with these emigrants in the land of their exile. Where did they go ? What place did they make their home ? Did they get plenty of bread ; and were the Moabites kind to them ?

The Bible history does not tell us. The next thing we are told about Elimelech is about his grave. He fled from Bethlehem to escape death by famine. But death followed him to this heathen land. Oh, how much happier would he

have been to have died among the green hills, where Abraham and Isaac erected their altars and served their God, than to have his rocky burial-place in a land of strangers and idolaters !

Several more years had passed, and Mahlon and Chilion had grown up to manhood. They married two young women, inhabitants of Moab. Their names were Ruth and Orpah.

But the grave that was made for Elimelech had soon to be opened again; both Mahlon and Chilion were taken ill. Their names, which mean "wasting" and "consumption," were sadly appropriate. You can imagine with what anxiety their poor mother and their wives, would watch by their sick-beds in that strange land. How often would Naomi pray to her fathers' God, that he would spare their lives and make them well again. But it was in vain. They both died, and Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah were left three sad broken-hearted widows.

What are they to do ? It was now ten years since Naomi had come from Bethlehem. The Lord had shewn her, by the death of husband and sons, the sin of trusting in others rather than in him ; and she had also heard that "God had

returned to Bethlehem, and blessed His people with bread." Often as she sat weeping, all alone, with her two daughters-in-law, her heart began to sigh after her old loved dwelling in Canaan. All were idolaters around her. She would remember, perhaps, how the villagers of Bethlehem used to meet together, and offer sacrifice to the true God, and sing His praise. "If I could only be there once more," she thought to herself, "I should be happy!"

Now Naomi was a good woman—and loved God—and was sorry that she had displeased Him. I daresay, too, her afflictions were blessed to her. God had taken away all she had, that she might look to Him alone. I doubt not she went down upon her knees and prayed to God—and asked Him to direct her as to what was best.

The day has at last come when she is to leave Moab and return to her early home in Canaan. She gathers a few articles together, and tying them up in a bundle, prepares for the journey. How mingled are her feelings! She is glad at heart to leave that land of idols—and yet a tear starts to her eye as she takes the last look of the only spot dear to her in Moab. It was the rocky

tomb where Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion were laid.

God, however, had been very gracious in another thing. Ruth and Orpah, after their husbands died—instead of leaving Naomi all alone, and being unkind and unfeeling to her—had proved a great comfort. They lived with her, and spoke tenderly and gently to her; smoothed her pillow in sickness, and dried her tears when her heart was very sad at the thought of being all alone!

What are Ruth and Orpah to do now? Are they to let Naomi take this long journey by herself? No! they will at least go so far with her. They will see her past the lonely valleys of Moab, and say ‘farewell’ when they have come to the borders of Canaan.

The three travellers have proceeded many hours (perhaps days) together, and now they must part. They have come under the shadow of some rock, or under a group of palms, the hot sun blazing at mid-day over their heads. The steep wall of Moab rising behind, and the sullen waters of the Dead Sea gleaming below. The kind daughters-in-law have thrown their arms by

turns around their mother's neck, and covered her with their kisses and tears. So real and deep is their grief that they "wept aloud." The rocks of Moab echoed to their bitter sobs! Orpah returns back to her own home, but Ruth's warm heart will not permit her to tear herself away from that fond embrace. "No, no," she says through her tears, "I cannot say farewell. Though it be to leave my own country and friends, I shall go to the land of Israel with *you*. *Your* home will be *my* home. I shall die there and be buried there. I shall not be sorry to leave Moab when I have *you* to live for and to care for!"

But Ruth declares more than this, and it is the most beautiful of the many beautiful things she says. She adds, "and *your* God shall be *my* God!" She has resolved to forsake idols, and to serve the true Jehovah. Naomi had taught her to love the God of Israel. When they were together she had doubtless told her all that this Great God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob had done for their Fathers.

Ruth came to see that Chemosh and Baal were dumb and cruel idols, but that the True

God was as good as He was great. She took the words of a future singer in Israel, and made them her own—

“This God is our God for ever and ever.
He will be our guide even unto death” (Ps. xlvi. 14).

But did Naomi all at once agree that Ruth should go with her? No. However happy the prospect of having, as her constant companion, one she loved so well; she felt she could not be selfish enough to take her away to the country of Israel from her own relatives and the home of her childhood. She therefore kindly says to her, “You must not think of being so good to me. Lonely as I shall be without you—much as I shall miss your loving smile—I must not dream of it! No, no; ten thousand blessings upon you for all your kindness to me and mine. But go back to your parents. I have nothing but a poor home to offer you in Bethlehem. You will be better off among your rich relatives in Moab. I shall often pray for you. Often shall I go to the flat roof of my lonely home, and, as the sun is flinging his last setting beams on the Moab mountains, I shall think of the living and

the dead that are there, and entreat my God for you!"

But her words are vain. Ruth has made up her mind that she is not to leave her. "Never," she says, "can any one be so kind or good to me as you;" and, clasping each other's hands, the two travellers—mother and daughter—set out on their journey!

Beautiful and touching is the tender affection and love of this young Moabite. It is always a sad and sorrowful thing for young or old to leave their native land—or the house in which they have lived—and where they have spent a happy childhood!

This must have been specially the case with Ruth, when the country she was leaving was so lovely and beautiful. The land of Israel, I have already told you, was bleak and bare in comparison with the noble valleys and wooded glens of Moab. But God will "not be unmindful" to forget her "work of faith, and labour of love." She has given up her earthly all for the sake of *Him*, and one of the poorest of His people. He will not allow her to go without her reward. "There is no one that hath left house,

or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundred-fold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, . . . and in the world to come eternal life" (Mark x. 29, 30).

And now Naomi and her daughter-in-law are nearing Bethlehem. I daresay Naomi was very glad and grateful when she saw once more the well-known valley and green hills, the village walls, and tall palms at the gate.

The citizens, one evening when the sun was gilding with his last rays the hills of Judah, see a bent figure approaching, leaning on the arm of a younger female. The tidings soon spread through the little village—"Naomi, the widow of Elimelech, has come back from the land of Moab!" As they cluster round about her, they are heard saying to one another, "Is this really Naomi?"

Why did they ask this? Ten years of sorrow had put wrinkles in her cheek, and dimmed the lustre of her dark eye. The sight of the old place and old faces brings back to her mind fresh thoughts of grief; and as her old fellow-citizens

rush to meet her, calling her by her name, and giving her the kiss of welcome, she says—"Do not call me by my own name *Naomi*, which means '*happiness*' (I am that no longer), but rather call me '*Mara*' (or *bitter*), because God has dealt very *bitterly* with me, and afflicted me! I was once happy here with my husband and two dear children; but I have left their early graves behind me, among yonder distant mountains, and I am come to Bethlehem to die!"

But good Naomi, even amid these fresh tears of sorrow, has not lost sight of the hand of her God. She does not say, 'I went out full, and I am brought home empty;' but "*The Lord*" hath brought me home thus! She was comforted in thinking that all her sorrows had been ordered by Him, and that nothing had happened to her by chance.

I am sure the villagers would be moved to sadness with the story of her grief, and would be very kind to her.

We shall meanwhile leave her and Ruth in their poor cottage home in Bethlehem, and pass to a new chapter in their history.

As the way to Bethlehem-Judah,
Ruth with willing footstep trod,
Let me seek "the better country,"
And with her thus vow to God :

"I shall go, Lord, where Thou goest,
Happy only where Thou art ;
I shall dwell where'er Thou dwellest,
Death itself shall not us part !

Oh, intreat me not to leave Thee,
Bitter would that parting be ;
Nothing in this earth would grieve me
But to be estranged from Thee.

Let not idols worse than Moab
Drive Thee from Thy rightful throne ;
Teach my tender heart to love Thee,
And to do Thy will alone.

Land of sin, and death, and darkness !
Thee I gladly bid farewell ;
God Himself prepares a city,
And invites me there to dwell."





CHAPTER II.

STORY OF THE HARVEST FIELD.

WHAT a happy scene and season harvest is! What little boy or girl has not enjoyed it! The corn-fields, filled with yellow sheaves, and echoing with the merry song of the reapers. The lark, as if sharing in the joy, soaring above their heads in the bright sky. It would seem to be Nature's great holiday.

If there was one period of the year more bright and beautiful than another in old Palestine, it was that of barley-harvest. It took place in the month corresponding to our April. "The flowers appeared on the earth, the time of the singing of birds was come, and the voice of the turtle was heard in the land" (Sol. Song ii. 12). Travellers there to this day describe the meadows and many of the fields at that season as exhibiting a blaze of varied colours—scarlet, and white, and blue.

I am now going to tell you about a harvest scene—more than three thousand years ago—in the valley of which I have previously spoken, situated under the village of BETHLEHEM. A number of happy Hebrew reapers were busy in its fields. The sickle was fast mowing down the yellow corn, and the overseer (or “grieve,” as we would call him) was going from sheaf to sheaf encouraging, by kindly words, the willing hands that were gathering in the golden treasure for his master. Others, apparently in poor circumstances—some old, and bent with years, some young—were seen following the steps of the reapers, gleaning any stalks of barley which the latter had happened to leave lying behind them.

Among these gleaners, we observe one figure keeping aloof from the rest. Her dark flowing hair and eye resemble an Israelite; and yet, from her dress and appearance, she seems a stranger. Her companions in the field every now and then cast a glance at her,—they seem to say something kindly about her,—and then resume their work.

I doubt not my young readers have guessed who this gleaner is. It is none other than Ruth! I ought to tell you that the poor people

among the Jews had, by the law of Moses (Lev. xix. 9), a right to glean in the fields around them. In many places in England and Scotland this liberty is still granted by kind owners and farmers.

Naomi and Ruth had come to a poor home in the old village. We may imagine them sitting together, oppressed with want, silent with sorrow, and knowing not what to think of the dark future.

If Ruth had been like many, who are selfish, and care only for their own welfare, she would have said, "I cannot bear this any more; I shall go back again, and join Orpah in Moab. Why should I starve here when I can have plenty in my old home?" But she did not mind herself. She loved Naomi too tenderly to think of leaving her; and she resolved to do all she could to provide for their distress.

She had seen from her window, that morning, a number of poor people following the reapers. She said to her mother, "Mother, let me go to the fields where the reapers are, and glean for you. Whatever scattered ears of barley I gather I shall bring home, and we shall grind them together, and make bread for ourselves."

Naomi at once said to Ruth, "Go, my daughter."

With a happy heart at the thought that she might do something for her good and grateful mother-in-law, Ruth sped away among the reapers in the valley. She was soon busy at work, going up and down the slopes and hollows. She would cast a glance sometimes in the direction of old Moab, with its rugged hills and sacred remembrances; but she would think most about God's kindness to her, and about trying to make Naomi, in her old age, comfortable and happy.

Now the part of the field to which Ruth happened to go, belonged to one named Boaz. He was a wealthy and powerful person. I think I am not wrong in saying he was the greatest man in Bethlehem. I daresay the people of the city looked up to him as a kind of prince. He would have a grand house and many servants. We read of his grandfather in the time of Moses. His name was Nahshon. When Moses set up the tabernacle in the desert of Sinai, a number of the princes of Israel made rich presents to it of gold and silver. The first name of these mentioned is the grandfather of Boaz (Num. vii. 12, 13). He presented the gift of silver bowls and golden

spoons, filled with oil and incense, besides many animals for sacrifice. Nahshon had a son called Salma. Salma married Rahab, the woman of Jericho who hid the spies when the children of Israel entered the Promised Land. Salma settled at Bethlehem (1 Chron. ii. 10). Perhaps he was the first to build the town, and give it its name, for he is called "the Father of Bethlehem."

But Boaz, though the grandson of Prince Nahshon, was better than mighty. He was a *good* man. He feared God. He liked to honour the name of God among his servants, and to keep them in mind who it was that covered, year by year, the valleys and fields with golden corn. How pleasant a thing it would be, if we had in our own land, many such pictures as the harvest-field of Boaz in the land of Israel. "Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said unto his reapers, The Lord be with *you*: and they answered him, The Lord bless *thee*!" (Ruth ii. 4). This, indeed, seems to have been a pious period in the history of the Hebrews. There were many people who loved and served God. The law of Moses was sacredly kept; and as they had no copies of it printed, as we have in our Bibles, the Levites went about

from village to village and from house to house, teaching and explaining it.

Boaz, when he came to the field, saw this young gleaner among his reapers. He went to his overseer, and asked him, "Who is this?" The overseer replied, "She is the young Moabitess who came the evening before with Naomi." He added that he had given her the leave that she had asked, to glean after the servants.

Boaz had already heard her touching history, and the story of her affection and love for her lonely mother-in-law. He went up to her as you see represented in the picture, and as she stood modestly before him, with her eyes fixed on the ground, he spoke kindly to her. He told her not to leave his field for that of any other, but to remain close by his female reapers. He further said to her, that when, in the hot sun, she felt thirsty, she need not be at the trouble of going to the well for water, but to drink from the pitcher or flagon which had already been drawn.

She was very grateful to this good master for his kindness. According to eastern custom, she bowed her face, and spoke a few words of heartfelt thanks to him.

Boaz uttered aloud a beautiful prayer for the young Gentile stranger. He asked God to pay her back for all her kindness to Naomi. "The Lord," he said, "recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust" (Ruth ii. 12).

Boaz, further to shew his favour for her, told her to go at dinner-time, in the heat of the day, to the tent pitched in the middle of the field, and partake of the refreshment that was there provided. He also commanded his young men to let her glean where she liked; and purposely to let fall some handfuls of barley, that she might have the more to take with her in the evening to Naomi.

When night came, and the reapers and gleaners returned to their several dwellings, we may imagine how pleased Ruth would be with her large gatherings. We always value things more that have cost us labour. Idle people, whether they are young or old, are never happy. When we work hard like Ruth for a good object, we are sure to be happy.

Naomi must have been pleased, indeed, to see

her daughter coming home with so large a quantity. She beat out what she had gleaned, and carried it home in her lap. It was "an ephah of barley," or nearly a bushel! Naomi went out to meet her, and inquired where she had been, and who was the generous owner who had dealt so kindly with a homeless orphan?

When Ruth mentioned the name of Boaz, the heart of Naomi was filled with gratitude. She blessed God for His kindness in leading Ruth to the field of this honoured Bethlehemite. She said, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead." She told Ruth (what Ruth had not known before) that Boaz was no stranger to them—that he was a near relative of her own husband, Chilion. Being such, he was her own "kinsman," and became, by the Jewish law, her chief protector.

How strange this was! Ruth, the lonely and friendless Moabitess, a poor young widow from a heathen country, had now, as her guardian and friend, the greatest man in Bethlehem, and one descended from a line of princes!

She continued, day after day, to go out to the harvest fields of Boaz. At noon, as he had bidden

her, she repaired to the tent where the rest of the reapers were gathered for dinner. Here, according to the custom of the times, Boaz himself came, taking his meal along with his servants, and, doubtless, speaking kindly to them all. I am sure all his servants must have loved much this good master. It is a beautiful thing when we see people in lofty station humble and condescending, mindful of the comfort and happiness of those in a lowlier rank of life.

One night, when it was about the close of harvest, Boaz went to the threshing-floor erected in his fields, in order to winnow some barley. They had a very different way of threshing their corn in Palestine from that which is followed at the present day in our country. They waited till after sunset, when the bright stars were shining in the sky, and when a cooling breeze generally arose. They then took the corn up with a pitchfork ; tossing it in the air, and beating it with a stick, the grain fell on the ground.

Imagine the scene in the field of Boaz. The shadows of evening are beginning to fall. The wood-pigeons, after feasting all day on the scattered grains of corn, are winging their flight back

for the night to their nests in the rocks and woods around. The sun, which has been blazing hot all day above the heads of the reapers, is now going down behind the mountains of Philistia. The whole western sky is flushed with crimson, and the warm glow tints every sheaf in the valley. By and by the valleys are left in shade, and the last ruddy rays linger on the mountain tops. Then all is silence, and the gloom of twilight deepens. In another hour, out come, one by one, the glimmering stars. They look like a thousand little gems set on the brow of night. Though the sun has gone down, the starlight is sufficient to make every mountain visible, as well as the walls and houses in Bethlehem. The tall graceful palms look more stately than ever at its gate.

Boaz has finished winnowing his corn, and has laid himself down to rest by his heap of grain, stretched on a sheep-skin for a bed. Meanwhile Ruth, at the direction of Naomi, anoints herself with olive oil, and puts on her large veil with white and blue stripes. She steals down from her home in the village, guided by the light of the stars, and lays herself down at the feet of

Boaz while he is still asleep. Covering her head with the cloak or quilt which he had thrown over him.

Boaz awoke at midnight. He wondered when he saw Ruth at his feet. I should tell you that it is a custom in the East for servants who have a favour to ask of their master, to come and sleep at his door, or near his person, all night. Boaz at once saw that Ruth had some favour to request, and he inquired what it was.

She said to him, "Naomi has sent me because you are the kinsman of my dead husband. As I am a poor friendless stranger from Moab, I would ask you, according to the laws of Israel, to become my Friend and Protector."

Boaz raised himself up in his bed, and anew blessed Ruth in the name of the Lord. When he rose in the morning he told her to bring her veil, and hold it out to him. When she did so, he filled it with six measures of barley. Placing this over her shoulder, she hastened back to the city to tell Naomi all that had happened to her.

Boaz so loved Ruth, and so admired her faith and goodness, that he wished, not only to be very kind to her as a near kinsman, but to make

her his wife. There was just one difficulty in his way. Another villager of Bethlehem was still a nearer Kinsman to her than he was ; and Boaz, by the Jewish law, could not marry her until he had first got the consent of this other relative.

He accordingly went one morning to the gate where the tall palm trees were, and where the principal people of the town were in the habit of meeting to transact business.

I daresay, when they saw Boaz, they wondered what was the object of his coming. He told them his errand, and requested the other near Kinsman to come and speak to him in presence of the Elders. The latter gave up his right to marry Ruth, and to buy back the parcel of land which belonged to Elimelech. According to the singular custom of the times, he took off his shoo and threw it at the feet of Boaz. This was the public sign employed by the Hebrews in giving up their right to any possession or inheritance. Boaz asked all the Elders and people who were present, to be witnesses to the transaction.

The people were very joyful and happy that

Boaz was to get so loving a wife, and that Ruth was to be so richly rewarded for all her tenderness to Naomi. They said to Boaz with one voice, “Do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in Bethlehem” (Ruth iv. 11).

In a few days Ruth became the happy wife of Boaz. She lived in his great house, and was mistress of all these rich fields she had gleaned, and all these good servants.

You can imagine how very happy old Naomi would be! I do not think she would call herself “*Mara*” now. The Lord had again dealt very *kindly* to her. She lived with Ruth in her new home, and they all loved and served together that merciful and gracious God who had made their cup to run over with blessings.

Not long after, Naomi was made more joyful still, for Ruth became the mother of a little child. They named it OBED. Naomi loved it very much. “She laid it in her bosom, and became a nurse to it” (Ruth iv. 16).

The women of Bethlehem were all very happy, too, for Naomi’s sake; for she was a great favourite with them. They called little Obed “the Nourisher of her old age.” I think I see the

little dark-haired boy playing at her feet, or kneeling by her knee, Naomi teaching him to fear God, and love everybody, as his good father and mother had done. Perhaps she would take him at times to the flat roof of the house, and, in the purple glow of evening, point across to the dark wall of Moab,—his mother's birthplace and the grave of his grandfather,—and then she would tell him how happier far he was away from that heathen land where they worshipped a dumb idol, and where the true God was unknown.

When Obed grew up, he became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David the King of Israel.

And now I must close my story about Ruth. We shall read of her 1350 years after, as the ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. She was honoured in marrying a Prince of Israel, but far, far greater was her honour in having, as one of her children's children, "*the Prince of the Kings of the Earth!*"

Dear young Readers! I should like you all to be like Ruth, in her kindness, her affection, her gentleness, her faith, her unselfishness. She gave up all for the sake of others, and loved God

above everything. See how great was her reward! The prayer which I have already told you Boaz uttered the first time he met her was now fully answered. I shall repeat it again—
“*The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.*”

He may not give to *you*, as He gave to her, houses, and lands, and servants, and money; but if you follow her steps, He will give what is better,—His gracious favour, and approval, and love.

If like Ruth in Bethlehem's harvest,
Gleanings on my path are strown,
Let me glean for others' welfare,
And not always seek my own.

Jesus! O thou Great Redeemer,
Be my Kinsman and my Friend;
Let Thy blessing and protection
Guide me to the Journey's End.

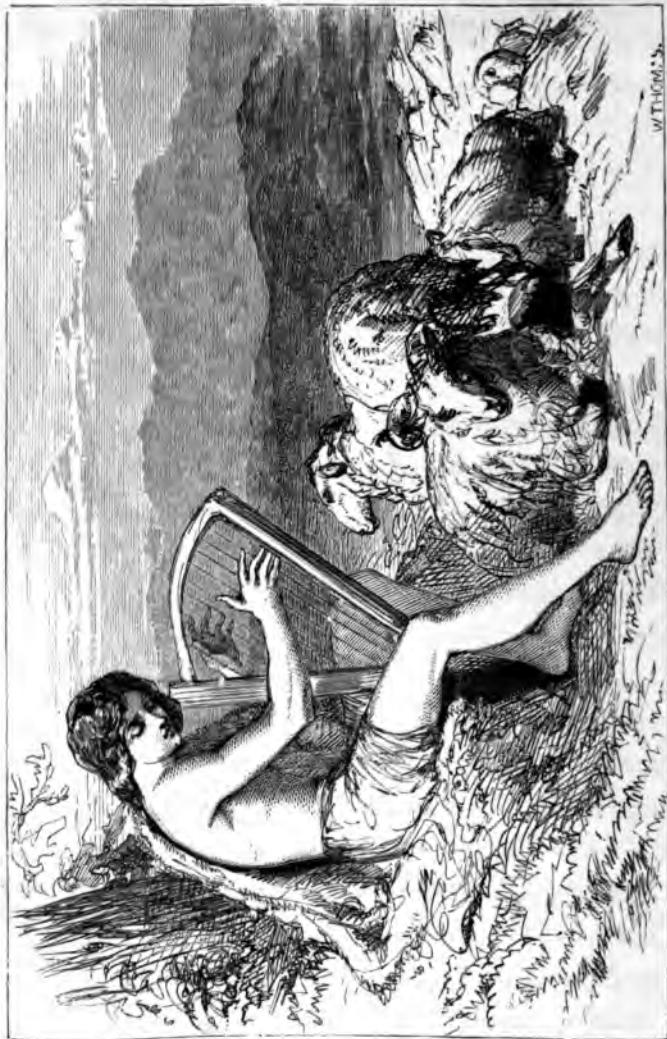
Mightier than the princely Boaz
Prostrate at Thy feet I lie,
Saying, cast Thy garment o'er me,
Clothe me in it, else I die.

Clothe me in that garment precious,
Without wrinkle, stain, or spot,
Which for sinners poor and friendless,
Bleeding Love so dearly wrought.

Long a wandering child of Moab,
Have I sought from Thee to roam;
Bind me to Thy Heart of Mercy,
Take me to Thy kingly Home.

Blessed Saviour, Thou hast never
Scorn'd one pleading voice away;
Make me Thine, yea, Thine for ever,
Thine in realms of endless day.





CHAPTER III.

STORY OF THE SHEPHERD BOY.

A LONG number of years had passed in the history of Bethlehem, since the events took place which I have told you about in last chapter. Boaz and Ruth, good old Naomi, and probably Obed, after faithfully serving God, had all been laid in their graves.

Obed had a son, whose name was Jesse. He, too, had by this time become advanced in life, and had no less than eight children of his own. Jesse, his wife, and his sons, I doubt not, lived in the same house and reaped the same fields that formerly belonged to Boaz ; for the Jews always liked to keep the inheritance of their fathers, and would not part with it for a great deal.

I am sure Jesse would often delight to talk to his boys about God's dealings to his pious ancestors. He would take them up to the top of his

flat-roofed house, and, as he pointed to the great Moab mountains in the distance, would narrate over and over the beautiful tale of my two former chapters. I am sure they would never be weary of hearing about Ruth's love and affection for her widowed mother, and how God always rewards and blesses those that are kind and good.

A little fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, was the youngest of these sons—the little Benjamin of the house. His name was DAVID, which means "*Beloved.*" He would especially delight to climb his parent's knees, and listen to these stories. How his bright eye would kindle as his father would tell him about the valleys of Moab and the castles of Sihon ; about Ruth clinging to Naomi and refusing to leave her ! Then about her gleanings in the harvest-field, glad to take a lapful of corn home at night to the poor cottage where her mother-in-law lived ; and at last becoming the wife of good Boaz, and a Princess in Bethlehem. I daresay, when as a little boy David first helped to feed his father's sheep in the Bethlehem valley, he would delight to make mimic castles and towers, like Sihon's, on the top

of the rocks, and roll down stones as Sihon's soldiers used to do on the enemy in the valley. At all events, what was better, I am sure, he would long to be good, and kind, and loving like Ruth, that he might be loved by everybody, and above all, by the Great God.

How do I say I am sure of this? Because we know that David *was* a very good boy—that he had early sought to love that Gracious Being he afterwards so beautifully called the *Shepherd of Israel*. Who knows but that the fountain of piety in David's young heart may have been fed by the faith and prayers of his great grandfather and grandmother, just as we read in after times, that Timothy first learned to fear God from the instructions and holy example of "his grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice" (2 Tim. i. 5). You remember a Bible verse which says, "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on them that fear him, and his righteousness unto *children's children*" (Ps. ciii. 17).

But David was courageous as well as good. How often we see goodness and greatness, bravery and true piety, going together! The

best and bravest soldiers of late years, have been men who feared God and "fought the good fight of faith." This was the case with David.

It required a brave hand and manly heart, in a country like Palestine, to be a shepherd. Sometimes one of David's flock would stray far up among the precipices, and he would hear it bleating with fear, as if imploring him to come and help it. He would set off in a moment with his crook, and, scrambling up the front of the rock on his hands and knees, would never stop till he rescued it, and brought it back in safety. At other times, when there was a scarcity of food in a dry and thirsty summer, he would nimbly ascend some dizzy height to fetch, in his hand or under his arm, a patch of green grass for some pining member of his fold. At other times, he would see an eagle soaring high in the air, hovering over some lamb that had wandered. With fleet foot he would again climb the giddy eminence, to save it from being carried away in the talons of this winged robber, and be torn to pieces.

He tells us himself of one such adventure. It was with a more formidable enemy than an

eagle. One night, when the evening shadows were falling, he saw in the thicket close by, a pair of glaring eyes like those of a wild beast. It was a lion, about to spring on one of his lambs. He had come from one of the neighbouring forests, probably that of Hareth. It was seldom these animals ventured so far as Bethlehem, but they often had their lair among the oleanders and patches of reed and brushwood near the Jordan and the Dead Sea. David's heart, I think, must have quaked, as he saw this terrible monster, with raised mane, couching in the long grass. Suddenly the lion took a great spring, seized in his teeth a little lamb, and bounded off with it to his den.

What was to be done? The young shepherd felt that he was unable himself to grapple with his lordly adversary. But he put up a prayer to God that He would help him. Then, grasping a club in his hand, he followed in close pursuit. The animal turned to see who it was that dared to dispute his rights. With a savage growl he let drop the bleating lamb from his teeth. Raising his mane, and lashing his tail with fury, he was about to make sure of a nobler victim. David

rushed in upon him, seized him by the shaggy "beard," and with some hard blows of his club laid him lifeless on the ground.

Great warriors in ancient times liked to have in their possession *trophies* taken from the enemy in battle—swords, and spears, and shields—to keep in mind the victories they had won. I think if David ever comes to be possessor of a large house or palace of his own, he will have the hide of that tawny lion hung up as a trophy on its walls. He will never forget that terrible struggle, nor God's kindness in coming to help him.

One day when Jesse and the elders of Bethlehem were standing by the gate of the town, under the palm trees, they saw an old man of venerable appearance, with a long beard and flowing robe, approaching.

"Who can this be?" they whisper to one another.

It is none other than Samuel, the Prophet and Judge of Israel.

They were very much terrified at first when they saw him. They loved and revered the good

old man, but they were afraid he was coming with some evil tidings from Saul regarding themselves and their city.

When he reached the gate, the first question they asked was—"Have you come on a peaceable errand?" He said, "Yes, I have."

God had sent him to Bethlehem, as he had been in the habit of going to other cities in the land, to offer a burnt-offering. Samuel invited several citizens to come to the sacrifice, and to the feast after it, and among these especially Jesse and his sons.

Why was he so particular in asking Jesse and his sons to come? Because God had come to him one day, and said—"I have resolved to remove wicked Saul from the kingdom of Israel, and to appoint a good and pious King in his room." He had told him, moreover, to take his horn and fill it with olive oil, and proceed to Bethlehem, for He had fixed on one of the sons of Jesse—a great-grandson of Ruth—to be the future monarch of His people!

Samuel did exactly as God told him. He first offered his sacrifice, and then before they sat down to the feast, he asked Jesse to make all his sons pass before him.

The first was Eliab. He was tall and king-like. Samuel felt almost sure that this was the one God had selected. He was proceeding to take his horn of oil to pour it upon his head, when God said to him, "No, this is not the one."

God does not look to the mere outward appearance,—to people being tall or handsome,—but He looks to the heart. When the heart is right in His sight, it matters little what we are outwardly. He told Samuel so. Saul, the present King of Israel, was striking in his person; he towered in height above all the rest of the people, and the Israelites were proud of his appearance. But God was now to shew them that goodness and piety were better far than all other attractions.

The second son came next, and stood before Samuel. God said, "Neither is this he."

The third son came next, and God said, "Neither is this he." Other four that were present did the same. But God said to Samuel, "It is none of these."

Samuel wondered. He said to Jesse, "Are these all your sons?"

Jesse said, "These are all, except one little boy,

and he is not at home. He is out in the Valley, taking care of the sheep."

Samuel said, "I must see him." So a messenger was sent to David to come as fast as he could. He was soon in Samuel's presence with his shepherd's crook, and his blooming face.

God whispered to Samuel, "This is the favoured one now; arise and anoint him!"

How David must have wondered, when, in presence of all his brothers, he saw this Prophet of God take the holy oil which he knew was used only for anointing Kings and Priests, and pouring it upon his head. How strange must have been the feelings of the Shepherd boy as he went back among his sheep! "The Spirit of the Lord," we are told, "came upon David from that day forward." God probably revealed to His young servant the great honour in store for him. But did it make him proud, or selfish, or haughty? Did it lead him to give up the keeping of his sheep, or to despise his brothers, or forget God? No. It only made him love and trust God more, and seek more to please Him.

David often took a harp with him as he fed his flock by the green pastures and still waters,

and when he was watching under the clear stars by night, and the moon tipped the rocks around with its silvery glory, he would sing what he afterwards wrote out in beautiful Hebrew,—

“ When I consider Thy Heavens, the work of Thy fingers,
The Moon and the Stars, which Thou hast ordained :
What is man, that Thou art mindful of him ?
And the son of man, that Thou visitest him ? ”

Ps. viii. 3, 4.

Although David *did* become King, as God had promised ; though he had a vast army and brave soldiers, and built for himself a grand Palace with cedar galleries in Jerusalem, I am not sure that he was ever so happy as when he was at Bethlehem keeping his father’s sheep, playing on his harp, listening to the cooings of the wild pigeons, watching now the leap of the gazelle, and now the deep shadows on the gray hills of Moab !

You should never wish, dear children, to be *great*, or envy those who are so. Great riches or high rank often lead into great temptations, and do not always make people happy. I am sure that all who really love you would rather see you good than great,—rich in the favour of God rather than rich in the things of the world.

When he became king, David was led to com-

mit sins which he never knew anything about when a happy innocent boy, gathering wild flowers among the green pastures, or climbing the precipices of his native valley. When he slept out amid the dewy nights at Bethlehem, with nothing for his curtains but the glittering heavens above him, he had the softest of all pillows to repose upon, (one which he had not always afterwards) —the pillow of a *quiet conscience*.

Reader, you are now like this Shepherd boy, young and happy. Try never to do anything wrong which will make you *unhappy*. Learn, like David, early to love God. He could not have been so happy, or great, or prosperous in his after life, if he had not loved God in his youth. Let your early life be like a little Bethlehem-valley ; where God's name is feared, and God's word is read, and God's praise is sung. If you have no harp like David, let your heart, with its many strings, be tuned to love and serve God, and then you will be happy. With a quiet conscience you will go to rest at night on your pillows, and next morning you will be able to say, "I laid me down and slept, I awaked, for God sustained me."

There is a far worse lion than that which David slew, who is watching to kill you. The Bible tells us that Satan is “a roaring lion,”—that he “goeth about seeking whom he may devour.” But Jesus Christ is the true David. Keep close to *Him*, and He will “stand by you and strengthen you,” and “deliver you out of the mouth of the lion” (2 Tim. iv. 17).

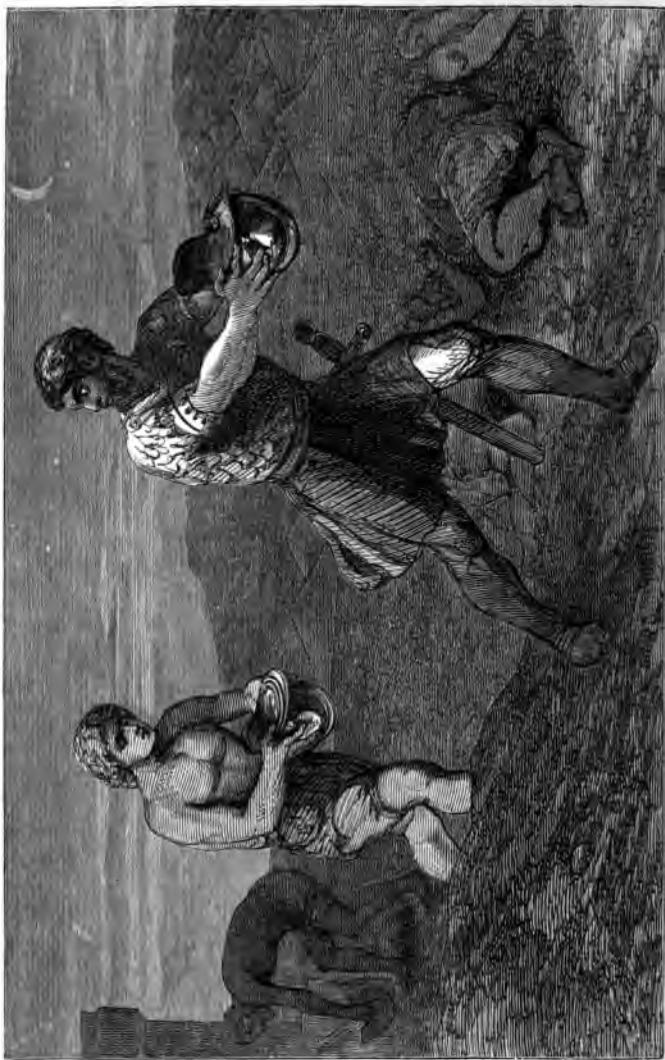
“ See the kind Shepherd Jesus stands
With all-engaging charms;
Hark how He calls the tender lambs,
And folds them in His arms.

“ ‘Permit them to approach,’ He cries,
Nor scorns their humble name,
For ‘twas to bless such souls as these
The Lord of angels came.

“ He ‘ll lead them to the heavenly streams,
Where living waters flow,
And guide them to the fruitful fields
Where trees of knowledge grow.

“ The feeblest lamb amidst the flock
Shall be its Shepherd’s care,
While folded in the Saviour’s arms,
We’re safe from every snare.”





CHAPTER IV.

STORY OF THE WELL.

I SHALL tell my young readers in this chapter, another story about *David* and *Bethlehem*, a good many years after he used to feed his sheep there.

If you look at the map of Palestine, you will see a long narrow strip of country close to the Mediterranean Sea. It was a rich and fertile portion of the land, full of strongly-built cities, and belonged to a very warlike tribe called the *Philistines*.

Like the *Moabites*, the *Philistines* worshipped dumb idols. Their principal god was *Dagon* ;—a hideous block, with the body of a fish and the head and hands of a man. They had always proved great enemies of the *Hebrews*. They made sudden attacks on their territory. They robbed the cities of their wealth, and the fields

and mountains of their crops and cattle, and carried them away within the gates of these walled towns.

The Philistines were, at the time I am going to speak about, at war with David. They had their large army encamped in the valley or plain of *Rephaim*, near Jerusalem. It was the time of harvest—the same lovely season I described in the story of Ruth. I fear these stern invaders would leave many rich fields without a sheaf of corn, and many poor people would die of famine.

David knew well the places of safety in the country. He was acquainted especially with those near Bethlehem, and he resolved, on the occasion I am now to relate, to take shelter in one of these, before he made the necessary preparations to meet the Philistines in battle and drive them back into their own land.

The wild hills between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea are full of caves. One who has visited that region likens the mountains there to a large honeycomb, so full are they of natural grottoes. The one to which David at present went was the largest of them all. It was the cave of **ADULLAM**.

Some years previously, he had taken refuge in the same cave from the fury of Saul, and while he dwelt in it he wrote some of the most beautiful of his Psalms. It is a very spacious natural cavern in the white limestone rock, consisting of many small chambers, like different rooms of a house, and capable of containing a great number of men.

Travellers at this day describe what a difficult thing it is to reach this strange spot. It is perched, like an eagle's nest, on the front of a rock. There is a precipice on the opposite side, fifteen hundred feet high, and a gloomy opening or gorge between them. I fancy it must have fared with David and his soldiers then, as with visitors now—they could enter it only by stealing along the ledge of the rock on their hands and feet. We are told that David's old father and mother were obliged once to flee to this cave, and take refuge from the anger of Saul. I often wonder how they could have climbed to it. It could only be the danger of remaining in Bethlehem that could have led them to attempt reaching such a place of shelter. David did not, however, allow them to remain long in this cold,

cheerless cave. Taking a chosen company of his soldiers he went across to the mountains of Moab, and asked leave of the king of Moab to allow them to reside in *Mizpeh*. Perhaps *Mizpeh* was the town where their grandmother *Ruth* once lived. They would be glad to visit the country from which she came; and while there, they would, I doubt not, often go to see the graves of *Elimelech*, and *Mahlon*, and *Chilion*.

But to return. It was in this same cave of *Adullam* that David had taken refuge once more from the invading Philistines. The weather was hot. The king and his brave men had been out perhaps most of the day under the burning sun. They had few provisions, and had come in for the night tired and weary, covered with dust. With throbbing pulses and blistered feet, they had flung themselves on the rocky floor of the cavern.

In a season of danger or trial, we often begin to think about the happy past. David did so at this time. Left to his own silent meditations, his mind began to wander back into former days. He thought of Bethlehem—its happy home—its green valleys—its refreshing streams; and then the old palms at its gate began to wave before

him, and his eye rested on the refreshing well that sparkled beneath them. When as a little boy he played with his brothers and sisters, or when older he was returning with his flocks for the night, he would think how often he had quenched his thirst with its cooling water. There was no such refreshment in this thirsty land. At this season of the year there was nothing but dry river beds. At all events, what water there was, was very unlike what he was wont to drink at the well by the old city gate.

He spoke what formed the subject of his thoughts. Perhaps he never dreamt any one would hear him, or pay attention to his words; but "Oh," said he, "*that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!*"

There *were* some that heard the King's words. I do not know how many more there were, but they reached the ears of three at least of his best warriors. Perhaps these had been keeping watch near his person, or pacing in their coats of mail up and down in front of the cave, to prevent any surprise from the Philistines, when they heard David's exclamation.

They looked at one another. The same thought

seems to have flashed across all their minds. Now a moment is to be lost. After, perhaps, whispering their purpose into the ears of some of the comrades, and requesting them to take their place on guard, they disappear in the twinkling of an eye among the tangled thicket which surrounds the mouth of the cave. Scrambling up the rock they reach the wooded forest of *Hareth* in time to see the sun flinging his last ray on the white cliffs and houses of Bethlehem.

They have, doubtless, many thoughts about the success of their journey. They have resolved if they can, ere to-morrow morning, to place a jar of water from the wished-for well by the side of their beloved king. But it is a daring exploit and full of danger. Though the camp of the Philistines and the main army was stationed at Rephaim, yet a garrison was in Bethlehem. They must pass through this garrison in getting to the well; and if they are discovered, they know too truly what their fate will be.

But, bold-hearted men, they are ready to die rather than not prove their love and devotion to their hero-king. They resolve either to get the water, or perish in the attempt!

We are not told in the Bible history the time they selected for the enterprise, but I think most probably it must have been at *night*. If they had gone in broad day, it would have involved certain discovery; but the darkness would favour them; more especially if, as is likely, they were familiar with the spot, and knew how it could be best approached.

I think I see these lion-hearted captains nearing the walls of the city. Lights are gleaming in the houses; the measured step of the sentries is heard as they pace to and fro, indicating too truly that the Philistines are on the watch.

The three soldiers have crept silently along the base of the hill on which the town stands, then up through the terraced vineyard. They have contrived to steal unobserved—they scarce know how—through the slumbering camp. In a few moments, screened by the darkness, they are all three surrounding the longed-for well. Silently they take their helmets (as you see in the picture), and fill them with the cooling water. Before they have a moment to quench their own thirst, they have retraced their steps, tracking their noiseless way through the garrison. They

have plunged again amid the surrounding vineyards ; then through the gloomy windings of the eastern valley. Before dawn of day, they are treading again, with light step and glad hearts, the forest of Hareth ; and, in a few moments more, they stand before their royal master with the warrior-cups in their hands, exclaiming—“Here, O King! is the water you longed for from the well of Bethlehem!”

David at first can scarcely credit the reality. I believe, hero-heart as he had, he would weep tears of wonder and gratitude. Such a proof of their attachment would touch him more than if they had brought their helmets filled with gold or precious stones. It was the noblest testimony of love (save that of Jonathan) that he experienced during all his eventful life.

How glad he must have been to see his three brave men back again in safety ! They, too, are glad in their turn that their jaded master will have his desire gratified ; and that, perhaps, after a fevered, sleepless night, he may have his lips moistened with the refreshing draught.

But “No!” says the generous monarch. “Your heroism and love has refreshed me more than any

mere cup of water could do. I cannot be so selfish as to drink this. I might have been the means, by my foolish request, of costing you your valued lives. I shall make it rather a thank-offering to God, for your generosity and devotion to your king." So David rose from his seat, and taking the helmets with the water, he poured them out on the floor of the cave, saying, "Is not this the blood of the men who went in jeopardy of their lives?"

This is a touching story. We are at a loss which to admire most—David, or his three captains.

What three noble heroes they were! Their royal master would always think of them with pride. Their names would be fondly remembered, too, by the Jews, long after they were laid in their graves.

I wish old and young would just shew the same love to the Lord Jesus Christ which these three men did to their earthly king, and be as willing to do all that He commands.

Is there any way by which we can fetch a jar of water from the well of Bethlehem, and give it to Jesus? Yes. He Himself tells us if we are kind and compassionate to the poor and needy, we can

do to Him, just what these three warriors did to David. “*I was thirsty, and ye gave ME drink.*” “*Inasmuch as ye did it to the least of these, my brethren, ye did it unto ME.*”

But the conduct of *David* is instructive, as well as that of his heroes. It tells us *never to be selfish*.

We may at first think what a pity it was, after all the toil and danger these brave men had gone through, that it went for nothing ; and that David, instead of drinking that dearly bought water, should have poured it away without even putting it to his lips !

I daresay it was very tempting to the king when he saw the cold clear sparkling draught, and thought that it was really brought from his old favourite well. If he had been a selfish man, he would greedily have drained the helmet cups, and never thought of the danger to which his men had exposed themselves. But he wanted to teach his heroes, and to teach us, a great lesson. He says, “I would not drink what might have cost these noble men their blood. Rather than put it to my lips, I shall pour it out as an offering

of my grateful heart to that God who has given me such good and faithful soldiers, and has spared the lives which they so willingly risked for my sake!"

Oh, what a lovely thing it is to be unselfish ; —to think of the good of others and the happiness of others, rather than of our own ! David would not have been any more refreshed a few hours after, if he had drunk the water. But he was, I doubt not, very happy often in his future life, in being able to feel that he denied himself in so small a matter, and shewed, by a striking and generous deed, the price and value he put on the lives of his brave soldiers.

Young readers, if you deny yourselves in little things, in order to promote the happiness of others, you are sure to be happy. Selfish boys or girls, who keep all they have to themselves, and never think of others, cannot be happy. No one loves them. Do you remember the golden rule, "*Do to others as ye would they should do to you?*" Do you remember what was said of the holiest and purest Being that ever trod this earth ? "*CHRIST pleased not himself*" (Rom. xv. 3).

These three warriors did a noble action. I do

not know that I ever heard of a greater feat of bravery and self-devotion.

There is ONE greater!—

What was this journey from the cave of Adul-lam to the well of Bethlehem, compared to that journey of love JESUS *undertook for you*, when He left His Father's home to fetch water for lost sinners out of the *wells of salvation*?

The heroes of David underwent great danger. They were willing to brave death for the sake of their king; but it was not *necessary* that they should die;—and, as you know, they returned to the cave with their lives safe.

It was different with Jesus! He knew He was to die a very bitter death. “He became obedient unto death.” The fountain of salvation could not be opened till He had first shed His precious blood.

David's heroes were willing to die for the sake of their *kind and good king*. David's Saviour and our Saviour was willing to die, and *did* die, for the sake of those who were His ENEMIES!

Children! hark! what heavenly chorus
Wakes the echo of the sky?
What bright spirits these before us
Throng the blissful realms on high?

Once they were in tribulation,
Sin obscured their bright array,
Till the *Fountain of salvation*
Wash'd their guilty stains away.

Still that Fountain full as ever,
All alike are free to share ;
Nor can guilty children ever
Come too heavy laden there !

Come ! all ye whose souls are dreary,
Toss'd with fears, with doubts distress'd ;
Here is shelter for the weary,
To the heavy-laden, rest !

Lord, we come ! not one awanting,
By Thy grace our souls redeem ;
Like the hart for water panting,
All would drink the sacred stream.

We come ! to hear the joyous story,
And to wash our garments white ;
Free to all the realms of glory,
Endless day, which knows no night.







CHAPTER V.

STORY OF THE LITTLE CITY.

ABOUT six hundred years after the time of my last story, there was a good old prophet who was wont to wander from place to place among the hills and cities of Judah. His name was **MICAH**. We know little about his history ; except that he was born either in *Moresa*, a village in the south of Judah, or in *Moresheth* of Gath, one of the old towns of the warrior Philistines, of whom I spoke in the previous chapter.

God raised up these prophets from time to time in Israel. They foretold things that were to come to pass in future years. They had no power to do this of themselves; but the Holy Spirit was sent down upon them and *inspired* them; that is, He put thoughts into their hearts, and words into their mouths, and all they said came true. We need not wonder that they were

greatly honoured and loved among the people. Many good and pious Jews had in their houses what was called a "prophet's chamber," where these men of God took up their abode. They were always welcome guests. The Israelites thought a blessing came with them to their households.

Ahaz at this time sat on the throne of Judah. He was a wicked king, and did not love the true God as his fathers had done. He saw a grand golden altar in the old city of Damascus, and he resolved to have altars like it set up in different places in Jerusalem, and in the other cities of his kingdom. He became a lover of idols. He shut the gates of Solomon's Temple and established cruel heathen rites in the neighbouring Valley of Hinnom. He even burnt his own little children in the fire. The conduct of this wicked king must have made the heart of Micah very sad.

There were other good and holy men raised up at this time, who must have proved great comforts to one another. Among these was the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets, *Isaiah*. I daresay he and Micah often met to-

gether, and sang on their harps the praises of that God they loved so well. When they thought of the many wicked kings that had sat upon the throne of David, they would long very much for the coming of their great **MESSIAH KING**, who was to "reign in righteousness."

Micah, doubtless, had often been at Bethlehem. The mountain city amid the hills of Judah indeed, would in itself look poor to him in comparison with his early home; for if *Moresheth* were his native place, and if it were like most of the towns and villages of Philistia, it would be enbosomed amid rich corn-fields, gardens, and groves; the latter in their season, yellow and scarlet with oranges and pomegranates. But every Jew loved Bethlehem as the birth-place of the sweet Psalmist of Israel, the man after God's own heart. As people in our own country go a long way to see places where great men were born and educated, we may be sure many would delight to go to Bethlehem, to see Ruth's valley, and David's old house, the mountains where he kept his sheep, and the well from which his heroes drew the water.

But **BETHLEHEM** was to be in future years far

more famous than it had yet been. *Micah* was honoured in being chosen by God to be the first to tell the world of the glory in reserve for it.

One day when the good prophet was occupied in his chamber in devout meditation, or as his knees were bent in prayer, or perhaps, as he was wandering among the hills of Judah, or seated under the shade of some venerable tree, the Holy Spirit came upon him, and said to him, "I have a great and glorious message for you to write in your roll."

The old man unfolded his parchment, and with his *stylus* or pen (as you see him in the picture at the beginning of this chapter), wrote the following prophecy:—

"But thou Bethlehem-Ephratah,
Though thou be little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is
to be ruler in Israel,
Whose goings forth have been from of old, and from
everlasting."

I have just told you that *Micah*, along with many of his countrymen, was now ardently desiring the coming of the Messiah. Many wonderful sayings and predictions had recently been uttered about Him. *Isaiah's* roll of prophecy was more

like “a gospel of Jesus Christ,” written by an eye-witness and disciple, than by one who lived so many hundred years before He really came into the world. We may well believe, that when good people in these days read such glowing words as these—

“Unto us a child is born,
Unto us a son is given;
And the government shall be upon his shoulder:
And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor;
The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of
Peace” (Isa. ix. 6)—

they would often ask one another, “What will be the place of His coming; where will the foot-steps of this Great King be first seen; where will His voice be first heard? If this “Ancient of Days” is, indeed, to be as Isaiah speaks of Him, “a child born,”—if He is to come to His own world as a little infant,—what will be His honoured birthplace?

Some would perhaps say, “It will likely be *Hebron*—the old capital city of Palestine—where our Father Abraham and the patriarchs loved to dwell; where the cave is, in which they are buried; and where, amid groves of terebinth, David was crowned king.”

Others would say, “It will be *Bethel*. He will come down guarded by bright angels, similar to those that travelled up and down the glorious ladder which Jacob saw.”

Others would say, “More likely still, *Jerusalem*—the ‘City of Peace’—will have the honour of first welcoming the ‘Prince of Peace.’” Angels will sing His advent-song over the courts of the Temple. The children of *Zion* will be the first to be joyful in their King!”

But “God’s thoughts are not as man’s thoughts.” That little mountain-city we now know so well, girdled with its green hills, and fragrant with the memories of kind Ruth and pious David, is to be the place where the world’s Great Saviour and Ruler is to “come forth!”

Micah, in the words of his prophecy, gives *Bethlehem* its old name of “*EPHRATAH*,” which means “*fruitfulness*” or “*abundance*.” Its terraces were covered with vines and vineyards. But He who is the “True *VINE*” was to give it a nobler and better fruitfulness. *Bethlehem* is the true “*House of Bread*,” because it is to have Him born within its walls whose name is “*the Bread of Life*.”

Perhaps it was because God loved this little city for the sake of Jacob, and Ruth, and Boaz, and Naomi, and David, that he resolved to confer upon it this highest glory, and make the Great Sun of Righteousness to shine first above its white walls and verdant valleys!

“Bethlehem-Ephratah, LITTLE among the thousands of Judah!”

Dear young friends, have you ever observed how God loves “*little* things,” and how often He speaks about them?

I think He wishes to assure you, that *you* are not forgotten by Him, that the soul of a little child is as precious to Him as the soul of a grown-up man or woman.

When He speaks, in another prophecy of Christ, as a smitten shepherd and His “sheep scattered,” He adds a promise, “And I will turn my hand upon THE LITTLE ONES!” (Zech. xiii. 7).

When Jesus was on earth, he said: “It is not the will of my Father in heaven that one of these LITTLE ONES should perish.” At another time “He took LITTLE children in His arms, and blessed them” (Matt. xviii. 14; Mark x. 16).

Again, when Jesus told Peter on the shores of

Tiberias to be a faithful shepherd of the flock, before He says a word about the sheep, He speaks first of the LITTLE ONES—"Feed my LAMBS."

My heart's desire and prayer to God for all of you who read this book is, that your hearts may become like Bethlehem,—“little cities”—where Jesus is to take up His abode, and where He will appoint “salvation for walls and for bulwarks.” He seems to say to each one of you, as Micah says of Bethlehem—“*Though thou be little, yet 'suffer the LITTLE children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven'*” (Mark x. 14).

Nearly seven hundred years had passed since Micah uttered his prophecy. Many pious Jews who loved to read God's holy word, and who knew that the fulness of the time had now come, would turn their eyes anxiously towards Bethlehem. They firmly believed that Micah's words would come true,—that that wondrous Being, whose “goings forth were from of old, from everlasting,” would there appear to Israel. And yet they would wonder much, how Jesus *could* be born there! They knew that He was to be descended from David's royal line, and there

were none of the family of David now remaining in Bethlehem. They had all gone elsewhere. Could Micah have been wrong? or is God's word to fail?

No! "Heaven and earth may pass away, but my word shall not pass away."

We shall see in the next chapter of our Bethlehem story, how God's promise and Micah's prophecy were faithfully brought to pass. Meanwhile, what I have said in connexion with the "little city" has called to mind this beautiful hymn, which many of you, I daresay, already know—

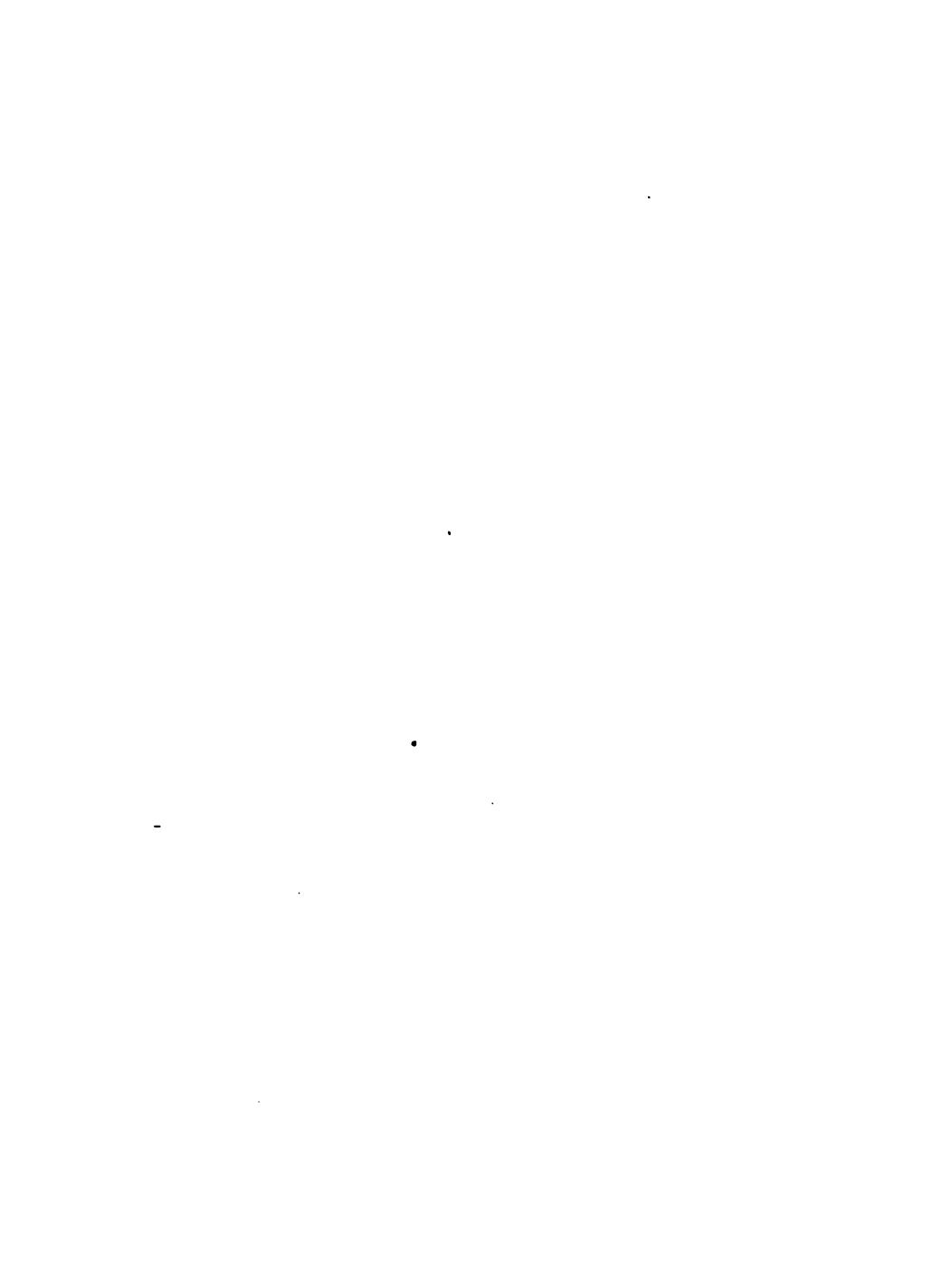
"I think when I read the sweet story of old,
How, when Jesus was here among men,
He once called *little* children as lambs to His fold,
I should like to have been with Him then.

I wish that His hands had been placed on my head,
That His arms had been thrown around me,
And that I might have seen His kind look when He said,
'Let **THE LITTLE ONES** come unto me.'

Yet still to His footstool in prayer I may go,
And there ask for a share of His love;
And I know if I earnestly seek Him below,
I shall see Him, and hear Him above.

In that beautiful world He is gone to prepare
For all those who are washed and forgiven;
And many dear children are gathering there,
For of such is the kingdom of Heaven!"







CHAPTER VI.

STORY OF THE MANGER.

A BEAUTIFUL evening has closed the day, and the sun is about to set on the land of Philistia. His last rays are gleaming in the hollows of the mountains of Moab, and tipping with silver the waters of the Jordan and the shores of the Dead Sea.

A man and his wife are seen wending their way through one of the green valleys between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They look wistfully, from time to time, to see if the white walls of Bethlehem are in view, for they are wearied with a tedious journey, and long to obtain a night's repose.

They had scarcely lost sight of the houses and temple of Jerusalem, when they came to a turn in the road overlooking a deeper valley. The sides of it were terraced and covered with fruit trees, figs, vines, and pomegranates, and at the ex-

tremity, perched on the opposite ridge, was a small town or village.

They could not be mistaken. It was the place whither they were directing their steps. With glad hearts they would exclaim, "There at last is Bethlehem!"

With intense interest would these two pilgrims from far North Galilee gaze on the sight which had suddenly burst on them. Other wayfarers on the road, and labourers returning after their day's work, would wonder why they looked so intently on these green slopes, and the little city which crowned them. Let us see what could interest them so much in it.

MARY was the woman's name. She knew that her ancestors had all come from Bethlehem. The Jews were very particular about keeping lists of their families (what are called *genealogies*), extending back often for many centuries. I dare-say some of my young readers have seen in their own homes a venerable Family Bible, perhaps with old-fashioned clasps and moth-eaten leaves, which has been handed down for many generations, containing on its fly-leaf the names of their Fathers and Grandfathers,—telling where

they were born and when they died. It was something of the same kind the Jews had of old. They not only had these in their private houses, but public registers of families were kept in their cities and villages; and, as you may believe, a Jew was very proud if he could trace his descent from some famous judge, or prophet, or warrior of Israel.

Now Mary knew, from the register she kept in her home at Nazareth, that her family was originally from *Bethlehem*. Better still, she knew that the blood of kings flowed in her veins,—that she was descended from no less a person than the great and good King David. Going higher still in her family roll, she found that she could claim as her ancestors Boaz of Bethlehem, and Ruth the Moabitess!

You may imagine, then, with what feelings she and her husband Joseph would, on the evening of which I speak, gaze down on the valley at their feet, and the city that was the abode of her forefathers. They would talk to one another of Ruth and her corn-fields; then casting a glance towards their left to the dark wall of Moab, they would think of it as the cradle of their race.

Then a gleam of sunlight would perhaps tip the sides of the more distant valley where David kept his sheep, and where old Samuel sent for him to have the holy oil poured on his head.

At any other time they would doubtless have paused long on these heights, and talked much about God's gracious dealings of old to their family ; but there are other and far more wondrous thoughts now in their minds. They cannot linger. So Joseph took up his pilgrim staff, and as the shadows of evening are creeping thicker around them, they pursue their way.

While these two pilgrims from Nazareth are approaching the white walls of *Bethlehem*, I shall tell you what it is that has led to their undertaking so long a journey.

The greatest of the twelve great Cæsars was now Emperor of Rome. He was called by the name of Augustus, which means "mighty," or "high." He had the noblest army and the bravest soldiers in the world. All the nations were afraid of him. Wherever he went he gained victories, and added to the vastness of his dominions. The prophet Daniel had spoken, more than five hundred years before, of the Roman Empire under the figure of a wild beast—"dread-

ful and terrible, and strong exceedingly”—having “great iron teeth,” which was “to devour and break in pieces” all that were before it (Dan. vii. 7). The prophecy came all true at this time. The nations of the world were crushed under the iron feet of Imperial Rome. The name of Cæsar carried terror wherever it was known.

From his palace in Rome, Augustus published a royal decree, that a list or roll should be taken of all the people in the Roman Empire.

Judea had by this time become a part or province of this wonderful kingdom. The legions of Rome had conquered it, and the Emperor had put a king of his own on the old throne of David.

In order that these lists might be taken correctly, and to prevent confusion, every family in Palestine was ordered to go to their “own city,” or the city of their tribe. In each of these cities there were men called *censors*, who took down the names of the people, along with their age, rank, trade, &c. This regulation proved very inconvenient for many who had to travel a long distance; but it was the word and will of the great Cæsar, and it must be obeyed.

Joseph and Mary, as I have told you, were

living in a cottage in distant Nazareth. Joseph was working at his trade as a carpenter, when the order came—"You must prepare to go to your own city, Bethlehem, and have your name taken down there, because you are of the house and lineage of David."

They were just completing the long distance of sixty miles, when they came within sight of Bethlehem, on the evening which I have described.

Oh, how God maketh the wrath of man and the pride of man to praise Him!

An earthly king, in the pride of his heart, decrees that a roll is to be made up of all his subjects. The King of kings has put this device into his mind, in order that a lowly family be brought from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and that the words spoken by an old prophet, and written in an old parchment roll, may be brought to pass!

And now Joseph and Mary have reached the city gate. The palms are hanging their graceful tops in the fading light, and quivering in the evening breeze; perhaps the old well of David is surrounded by women and children, drawing water from it, and casting a glance at the two travellers as they enter.

Mary's ancestor (Boaz) was once "Prince of Bethlehem," and possessed one of its noblest houses and some of its most fruitful fields. But days are now changed. This distant descendant of Ruth is a poor woman—her home a cottage in the hills of Galilee—her husband a carpenter by trade. She has not a rood of ground nor a stone in the town of David she can call her own, nor even a friend from whom she can now ask lodgings for the night!

They go to the public inn, but even there, there is "no room" for them. The inn or *khan* of Bethlehem was generally much occupied, as it formed the first halting place, after Jerusalem, for those who were going down into Egypt (Jer. xli. 17; 2 Sam. xix. 37); besides, many having come that evening on the same errand with themselves, every lodging in it is quite full. What are they to do?

Near the inn is a stable. Joseph asks leave to dwell there for the night, thankful for the lowly accommodation it affords.

In that rude stable, with the beasts of burden feeding around them, and noisy wayfarers coming and going all night, old Micah's prophecy is ful-

filled. The greatest event in the history of the world takes place—the Son of God and the Prince of Peace is there born !

Mary takes her infant babe, and wrapping Him in swaddling bands, lays Him in the manger. She was afraid that the animals around might trample upon Him, and she lifts Him for safety, and places Him in one of the empty troughs from which they ate their food.

Wondrous cradle of “God manifest in the flesh!” We should have thought, if this Great Being, whose “goings forth were of old from everlasting,” had come down to the earth at all, and condescended to be born as a little child, that he would have opened His eyes in some glorious palace, with gilded ceilings, and marble pillars, and Tyrian draperies ;—that His cradle would have glittered with gold and precious stones,—that the Queens of the Earth would have nursed Him and sung His cradle-song. But how different !

“Every fox had where to rest,
Every little bird its nest ;
But the Great God the world who made
Had not where to lay His head.”

Reader, the soul of man has often been com-

pared to the Inn of Bethlehem, where there is room for every guest but the Lord of glory.

Let not this be the case with you. Let it not be said that there is room in your young hearts for the *World*, and *Sin*, and *Satan*, but none for that Blessed Saviour who came to a lowly manger that He might lift *you* to a glorious crown! Turn the words of this little hymn into a prayer:—

“ Fill our souls with thoughts of Jesus,
And of heaven where He is gone;
And let nothing ever please us
He would grieve to look upon.

For we know the Lord of glory
Always sees what children do,
And is writing now the story
Of our thoughts and actions too.

Long have we permitted others
To usurp His rightful throne.
Friend of Friends, and Best of Brothers,
Come and make our hearts thine own.

Let our sins be all forgiven,
Make us fear whate'er is wrong;
Lead us on our way to Heaven,
There to sing a nobler song.”







CHAPTER VII.

STORY OF THE SHEPHERDS.

It was now 1300 years since Ruth gleaned in the fields below Bethlehem, and nearly 1100 years since David had played his harp among its pleasant valleys, and fed his father's sheep.

In one of these valleys (about a mile from the town, and on the nort-east side of it) a number of shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks.

It was night. The sun had gone down. The birds had folded their wings. The sheep themselves were lying peaceful and still. The dew was drenching the grass, and the stars were sprinkled over the face of the sky. You remember how David, at the time in which he lived, required to defend his flock, by night as well as by day, from the wild beasts that had their lairs around. Though so many years had passed since then, there were still foxes and wolves prowling

about on the dark hills, ready to pounce on the sheep or lambs and carry them away to their dens. Hence the Bethlehem-shepherds had still to be as vigilant during the silent night watches in guarding their fleecy charge, as the Son of Jesse was in *his* day.

I think it is more than likely that these shepherds of Bethlehem, of whom I am now going to tell you, were good and pious men ;—that they loved the Great God who made the mountains and valleys, and the bright stars glittering above them. They would repeat to one another those sweet Psalms which David used to sing in the same valleys, especially that beautiful one where God is spoken of as a *Shepherd* causing His sheep “to lie down in green pastures and by the still waters.” Above all, I think they would delight to talk of the coming of the great Messiah, and of Micah’s prophecy that He was to be born in their own little city.

They knew that the time of his birth could not now be far off. Perhaps often in the deep night, when other people were asleep, would these holy men, by the light of their fires, or by the light of the clear moon, read together the prophe-

cies about JESUS—what King David, and Isaiah, and Zechariah, and Micah had said about Him;—and then they would pray to God that He would soon bring it all to pass;—that they might see with their own eyes this Great and Good Shepherd who was to “gather the Lambs in His arms, and carry them in His bosom.”

Perhaps every day they would be looking for some messenger coming from Bethlehem to tell them the joyous news that Messiah had appeared; or, as they looked upwards in the calm midnight sky, they might expect to see some glorious cloud or chariot of fire, bringing Him down from heaven to its gates; or, as many others of the Jews expected, they might watch for some bright star in the firmament, as the sign of His birth!

In the night that Joseph and Mary took up their dwelling in the stable at *Bethlehem*, these lowly shepherds were startled from their watch by the sudden appearance of a very dazzling light. It shone round about them;—it brightened up all the valley and the peaks of the surrounding hills. The very stars in the sky were dimmed by its lustre.

We can hardly wonder that at the moment “they were afraid.” The visits of glorious Angels were much rarer then, than they were in former times. When a bright Being, therefore, from the upper Sanctuary stood before them, we cannot wonder that they were at first struck with awe and terror.

But the Angel spoke kindly to them. He told them “not to fear,” for he had a very joyful message to bring to them, and to all the world.

I think before he told them what it was, the shepherds must have guessed the glad tidings. How eagerly would they listen as he uttered the gracious words—

“UNTO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID,
A SAVIOUR, WHICH IS CHRIST THE LORD!”

“*And this,*” he added, “*shall be a sign to you.*” What? Is it, “you will find a glorious palace reared in the old city of David for the infant King—angels stooping over His cradle of gold—and a crown set with gems encircling His brow?”

No! It is that He will be found lying in a manger of oxen, with the straw for His bed!

The instant the angel (probably Gabriel) had uttered these words; the midnight sky above

their heads was filled with a company of "the Heavenly Host," in bright attire. A few minutes before, nothing was heard in that lone valley but the bleating of the sheep or the warbling of the rills. Now, a glorious song fills the air. The Seraphim in Heaven were stooping to hear it—

"GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST,
AND ON EARTH PEACE,
GOODWILL TOWARD MEN!"

Immediately all was silence again. The angels had left; the valley was in darkness, and the stars looked down as before from their silent thrones in the sky!

What are the shepherds to do? Are they just to return to their watch, after having heard the joyful news?—or, if they go to Bethlehem, will they wait till morning, when the sun will lighten their path, and they can leave their flocks in safety?

No! It was far too glorious a message to admit of any delay. The last notes of the heavenly song had no sooner died away in the silence and darkness, than they said one to another, "*Let us now go to Bethlehem.*"

They did not say, "Let us go and see whether

this thing has come to pass which the angels have told us about ;" but " Let us go and see the thing which *is* come to pass." This shewed their faith. They did not question God's word. They knew what God said must be true.

They came "*with haste* ;" I daresay they ran quickly along the valley, taking the shortest foot-paths they could find to reach, first the city-gate, and then the stable of the *khan* which the angels spoke of.

How their hearts must have beat with *mingled* joy and awe as they ran along the streets, and thought that in a few minutes they would see HIM, for whom the holiest of their patriarchs and prophets had longed with burning hearts—the great Messiah of their nation!

They have reached the stable door. They tell their wondrous tale—" We have seen a multitude of angels in the sky to-night, when we were feeding our flocks; they have told us that Christ is born in this lowly stable!"

It was just as the angels had informed them. *There* was Joseph and Mary, and the little infant in his manger couch !

Honoured *Shepherds* of BETHLEHEM ! They

were the first who were called, leaving their sheep and their flocks, to "behold the Lamb of God!"

It was predicted by Isaiah, in speaking of the Gospel of Jesus, that it would be preached "to *the poor*." These humble Shepherds of *Bethlehem* were representatives of the *poor* of every age. What an encouragement to all in lowly station—whether they be old or young, who live in poor houses or cottages, and work for their daily bread—to think that the first in the world who heard of the birth of Jesus, and came to worship Him, were not those with great riches and renown, and clad in royal attire, but men with shepherd's crooks and coarse clothing from the hills of Judah. The kings of the earth were sleeping on their pillows, when angels appeared to some lowly keepers of sheep in the *Valley of Bethlehem*!

How this should lead us to honour those who are in lowly life, when they were so honoured by God; and to rejoice that the Bible is not a book for the rich, or the great, or the learned, but for the poorest of the poor.

Not only so, but did you ever think, that

JESUS Himself came not as a *rich*, but as a *poor* child ? Even His cradle, mean as it was, was a borrowed cradle. Jesus, by thus coming to our world *poor*, wished to shew that He does not despise or look down upon poverty. If you are ever tempted to be unkind to the poor, or to think lightly of them, remember the stable, and the manger-cradle made of coarse planks, at BETHLEHEM !

These good Shepherds did not tarry longer than was needful in the city. They had their flocks to attend to ; and, after they offered their tribute of love to the new-born King, they prepared to return. God never intends religion to interfere with the duties of life. I believe those who fear and love God most, perform their worldly duties most faithfully.

You can think of the happy hearts of these Shepherd worshippers, as once more they come out of the Bethlehem-gate at the early dawn of morning, and descend the winding path through the terraced vineyards.

The sun may have been rising as brightly as ever behind the hills of Moab ; but they knew, what the rest of the world were still ignorant of,

that a brighter “SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS” had that day risen upon the earth!

They told what they had heard and seen to every one they met. It was too good and glorious news to keep to themselves.

Dear young friends, the Angels bring the same message to *you* as they brought to these Shepherds. There is a separate message for each little boy and girl who reads this book—“*Unto you is born this day a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord!*” Unto you ;—as if there were no other in all the world to hear it.

Go then, in thought, with the Shepherds to *Bethlehem* ;—gaze on that Infant of days ;—He has come from His bright throne in Heaven, to be born in poverty, and all in order that He might save you!

Do not be content with merely hearing about Jesus; but, like the Shepherds, go and see Him, and love Him, and glorify Him. Happy are all those who take that “Holy Child” for their Saviour and their King.

I shall close with a well-known hymn about the Angels and their Song :—

Hark, the Herald Angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King;"
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!

Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies,
With the heav'nly host proclaim,
"Christ is born at Bethlehem."

Christ, by highest heavens adored,
Christ the everlasting Lord,
Lowly lays His glory by;
Born for men, for men to die.

Hail! thou glorious Prince of Peace;
Hail! thou Sun of Righteousness;
Ris'n with healing on Thy wings,
Light and life Thy rising brings.



CHAPTER VIII.

STORY OF THE WISE MEN.

You will remember, in the first Chapter of this little book, that I spoke of *Balaam*, a famous soothsayer from the highlands of Mesopotamia, standing on the top of one of the gray hills of Moab, with king Balak and his princes around him, and that as he looked across towards BETH-LEHEM, he spake of a “star that *was to come out of Jacob.*”

Balaam’s words would doubtless be told at the time to many of the Moabites. They would be handed down from generation to generation, long after the old prophet who uttered them was in his grave. They would be carried to countries further east still. In ancient times, whenever a very bright star appeared, or a cluster appeared together, people thought some great prince, or warrior, or poet, or sage was to be born.

I should tell you, that at this time, not only in Judea, but throughout the whole world, there was a general expectation that a Great King was to appear. Many who dwelt not only in Moab, but in Arabia, Chaldea, Persia, and other countries around, and who shared in this feeling, would, I daresay, often think of the prophecy of *Balaam*, and look for the appearance of the predicted STAR.

There were some “wise men,” Magi, or Sages (some think princes, more likely priests), who dwelt in one of the countries lying east of Moab. They had in all probability known of Balaam’s prophecy. I daresay, too, as they lived nigh the river Euphrates, on the borders of the old kingdom of Chaldea or Babylon, they may have heard about Daniel’s predictions, in which he spake of the coming of “MESSIAH the Prince,” to whom was to be “*given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom; that all people, nations, and languages, should serve Him*” (Dan. vii. 14, and ix. 25).

Now these “Wise Men” seem to have been fond of all kinds of study, but especially of astronomy. Though there were no telescopes in those days, many studied the heavens at night with

the naked eye. They took observations of those wonderful stars which God has put in the firmament, and which, in the skies of Arabia and Persia, must have been peculiarly beautiful. Being, by their heathen religion, worshippers of fire or light, they came to worship the STARS, the glorious lights of Heaven.

One night, when these magi were engaged, as usual, gazing up into heaven, they observed a Star which they had never seen before. It was brighter than the rest. Can it be Balaam's Star, "*the Star of Jacob*," which has at last risen above "the mountains of Moab?"

Yes ; "the Great LIGHT of the world," for whom these worshippers of light had so ardently longed, is come; and the God of Jacob had hung that beautiful silver lamp in the sky, to guide them to the manger at Bethlehem. What a strange feeling of awe and wonder must they have had, as they gazed on this silent, and as they thought, Divine messenger, in the midnight sky!

What are they to do ? It is a very long way to go from their own land to Judea. There were comparatively few roads then; and as they

were strangers to the country of the Hebrews, they would not easily find the way. But they were assured that God would guide them by the light of this Heavenly Lamp, and they resolve without delay to go and see for themselves the Great Prince **MESSIAH**, and worship Him.

But they said to themselves, “We cannot go without presents.” People in the East, even at the present day, when they travel to see a great person, always take some gifts with them. It would not be thought respectful or courteous to go without an offering, however small or trifling. Accordingly these great men gathered into a parcel a portion of the best things they had in their possession;—some “gold” (perhaps cups and vessels of gold), “and frankincense, and myrrh;” and putting them in a bundle on their shoulders, they set out on their pilgrimage.

So soon as they began to travel, the bright Lamp in the sky began to travel with them. As they pursued their way through the valleys of Moab, its soft radiance lighted up their path. After crossing one of the fords of the river Jordan, they approached Jerusalem. It was very natural for them to go straight to the capital

of the country, the Sacred City where they knew the Hebrews had their Temple. They would say to one another, “ We are sure to find the Infant King here.” They would expect, in honour of the great event, to listen to the national trumpet of Jubilee ;—to see beacons of joy on the hill tops around, and to hear the happy tidings of his advent on every tongue.

Perhaps it was the first time these eastern travellers had ever been at Jerusalem, the Hebrew capital. They would be glad at the prospect of seeing the renowned City where Solomon lived; to which the famous Queen of Sheba came to visit him, and was so astonished with his greatness and grandeur.

But the reign of Solomon and his successors was now at an end. The sceptre had “ departed from Judah;” and this fact, according to another older Jewish prophecy, rendered it certain that “ SHILOH ” must be about “ to come ” (Gen. xlix. 10). A wicked king, Herod (falsely called “ *the Great* ”), was now in the palace of David and Solomon, appointed by Augustus Cæsar to be ruler over the Jews. He was by this time an old man, upwards of seventy years of age ; but he had not

feared and loved God when he was young. His early life was a very wicked one, and when gray hairs came upon him, he was the same godless man and cruel tyrant that he had ever been. Those who live without God in the season of youth, seldom come to alter when they grow old.

The Magi are travelling along, probably by the ordinary Jericho road. They have passed close by the little village of *Bethany*. They are walking across the famous Mount of Olives, on the western slope of which the glories of Jerusalem would first burst upon them. The valley of Jehoshaphat is below them, with the brook Kedron flowing over its rocky bed. In front is the splendid Temple of Herod, and his Palace on Mount Zion.

They went direct to some of the great people in the city; either to the Jewish priests, or to some of those connected with Herod's palace, and asked, "*Where is He that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen His Star in the East, and are come to worship Him?*"

Herod and all the people in Jerusalem were greatly startled at the inquiry of the wise men,

and what they told them about the wonderful STAR—how it had appeared suddenly in the sky, and had guided them during all their long journey.

The King trembled. Though he was a wicked man, yet he could not help believing in the existence and power of that God he had not learned to love. He feared much when he heard of this mysterious lamp which had been hung in the sky. I think Herod, too, must have known well about Balaam's prophecy; for he was himself an Edomite, the country adjoining the land of Moab. When these wise men, therefore, told all about the silent guide in the firmament, he felt that his throne was in danger. He was afraid that the *Messiah*, if He had indeed come, would take his crown and sceptre from him, banish him from his palace, and become, as the magi had called Him, "KING OF THE JEWS."

He gathered forthwith together all the priests and scribes in Jerusalem (those who were best read in the Jewish Scriptures), and said to them, "Unfold your rolls of prophecy, and tell me all that your prophets have declared about the birth of the Messiah."

One of these took the roll of Micah's prophecy, and read it as follows:—

“*But thou, Bethlehem-Ephratah,
Though thou be little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is
to be Ruler in Israel;
Whose goings forth have been from of old, from
everlasting.*”

Then Herod sent for the wise men and said to them, “I should like you to go to *Bethlehem* and see if Micah's prophecy has come really to pass. If it be true, and Messiah is born, come back and tell me, and I shall go and worship Him also.”

He had no thought or purpose of worshipping. He had a darker design in his heart, of which I shall tell you afterwards in another chapter.

It would seem to have been in broad day-light when the eastern sages came to Jerusalem. Perhaps they had rested there for the day after their long journey, and waited till evening ere resuming it again. At all events, we infer, from what is said in the Bible story, that they had ceased for a little to see the bright star which had accompanied them hitherto. I am sure they

would be very sorry to lose sight of this heavenly guide, and would long to see it again.

The piety and faith of these good men was here signally displayed. Many would have been discouraged by not seeing the star. They would have given up their journey in despair, and returned to their homes. But not so with them. They trusted in God. They knew that He would light up His own lamp again. So they set out once more from Jerusalem for Bethlehem.

And the Lord did just as they thought He would do. No sooner had they resumed their journey, and perhaps the evening shadows had begun to fall, than the meteor glittered as bright as ever.

Whenever we follow the path of duty, God is sure to bless us. Do you remember that beautiful verse which says, "*Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord;*" and that other, "*Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness.*" We are told they were overjoyed when they saw their longed-for star again. Their tongues were filled with praise.

There is a beautiful tradition which travellers mention regarding a *well*, which is seen to this

day three miles from Jerusalem. It bears the name of the "*Well of the wise men.*" It is said that they sat down by its brink, weary and tired, to refresh themselves—that while gazing down into its clear water, they saw the missing star reflected on the surface, and one of them shouted with gladness.

Silently does this bright messenger continue its way through the sky, passing star after star in the crowded heavens. So long as it continues to move they do not slacken their pace. All at once it comes to a pause. It settles straight above the walls of *Bethlehem*, tinging the quivering palms at the gate with its silvery light.

The wise men now feel sure that they have reached the end of their journey,—the honoured spot of Messiah's nativity. On they hurry through the old city of Ruth and David, to pay their homage to the Infant King.

How strange must it have been to these men, accustomed to Eastern magnificence—to splendid palaces, and hanging gardens, and gorgeous dresses,—to enter the lowly stable amid the lowlings of cattle, and find a humble man and woman bending over a little babe in one of the stalls.

Yet, for this reason, who does not admire their faith? They do not say, "This cannot be Messiah; He never would have come to so mean a dwelling and cradle as this!" One moment they are seen presenting their offerings;—at another they are at His feet. Bending on their knees, and with their foreheads touching the cold earth, they hail in this poor infant the Saviour of the World!

Beautiful picture!

In the last chapter, I spoke of the honour God put on the Shepherds feeding their flocks in the adjoining valley. They were the first to whom Angels were sent with the joyful tidings that a Saviour was born. In this, I called them the representatives of the *poor* in every age, who are to love the Lord Jesus, and to be welcomed by Him.

These Magi, whom God has now brought from the far East, are the representatives of the great, the wise, the rich, the noble, who were also in future ages to rejoice in the same Messiah as their Lord and King.

The Gospel of Jesus is suited both for poor and rich. It is so simple, that the poorest man, or

woman, or child can understand it, and rejoice in it. It is so great and glorious, that the wise, and mighty, and noble, may well exult in its glad tidings, and feel honoured in coming, as the rich Magi did, to worship at the feet of the Babe of Bethlehem!

The visit of these eastern Princes doubtless prefigured that time of which the old prophets have spoken, when the Monarchs of the earth will feel honoured in casting their crowns at the feet of Jesus, and adoring Him as King of kings and Lord of lords. You remember how sweetly the Psalmist of Israel (himself a king) sings of this—

“The kings of Tarshish and of the Isles shall bring presents :
The kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.
Yea, all kings shall fall down before Him;
All nations shall serve Him.”—Ps. lxxii. 10, 11.

There was another lesson the adoration of the wise men taught.

They were *Gentiles*. Although they themselves seem to have known God as the true God, yet they dwelt in a *Gentile* land, among those who were heathens. Hitherto, the Jews alone were called the people of God. God had sepa-

rated the Hebrew nation from the rest of the heathen world, and none of the Gentiles were admitted to share their peculiar privileges.

But under the Gospel Kingdom it was to be quite different. The wall which separated between Jew and Gentile was to be pulled down. Jesus was to be a Saviour, not for the people of Israel only, but for the whole world—"a light to lighten the *Gentiles*, as well as the *glory of His people Israel*" (Luke ii. 32). His dominion was to be "from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth" (Ps. lxxii. 8).

These wise men of the East were the first-fruits of this Gentile harvest. They were the representatives of the nations, who were in after years, like our own happy Britain, to cast their idols and false gods away,—to embrace Jesus as their Saviour, and to be called Christians.

The Star of Jacob had risen over *Bethlehem*; and, as it sheds its peaceful light over the manger cradle, we are reminded of the words of Isaiah, as we see the Eastern Kings coming with their gold, and incense, and myrrh, "*Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising*" (Isa. lx. 3).

One other incident in connexion with the visit of these good men is mentioned by the sacred writer.

After they had paid their homage and presented their costly gifts, they were warned by God at night, when they were asleep (dreaming, perhaps, about all that they had that day heard and seen), not to go back again to Jerusalem, but to return straight home to their own country. In doing this, I daresay they would take very much the same road which Elimelech and Naomi took years before, when on their way to Moab. I am sure they would return home with hearts full of gratitude to God for all His mercies. They would delight to tell in their own land about the silver Lamp by means of which the God of the Hebrews had conducted them to Bethlehem ; —how they had followed its path in the sky, till it rested over the city of David,—that there they had seen the Infant King of the Jews, and had laid offerings from their own country at His feet.

Dear young reader, have you come like these good Magi to the Infant King, and worshipped Him ?

You may have no such gifts to offer as they had ; neither gold, nor frankincense, nor myrrh ; but you can bestow what He will value more.

“My son, my daughter,” He says, “*give me thine heart.*” You can be good, and gentle, and kind, taking God’s holy Word as the *Star* to guide you through the journey of life. Whenever you are in trouble, or difficulty, or perplexity, always, like the wise men, direct your eye to this holy Lamp, which He has still hung in the sky, to be “*a light to your feet, and a lamp to your path.*”

“ Brightest and best of the sons of the morning
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us Thine aid ;
Star of the East, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer was laid.

Cold on His cradle the dew-drops are shining,
Low lies His bed with the beasts of the stall ;
Angels adore Him, in slumber reclining,
Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all !

Say, shall we yield Him in costly devotion
Odours of Edom and offerings Divine,
Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, and gold from the mine.

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
Vainly with gold would His favour secure,
Richer by far is the heart’s adoration,
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us Thine aid ;
Star of the East, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer was laid.”





WITCHES.

CHAPTER IX.

STORY OF THE SLAIN INFANTS.

I TOLD you in the last chapter, how terrified King Herod was when he heard about the Star, and the little Babe that had been born in Bethlehem.

I daresay he did not sleep much that night, after the wise men left his palace in Jerusalem. He would toss to and fro on his pillow, and long for the morrow, when he expected them to come back and tell him all that had happened.

Next day came, but hour after hour passed away without any tidings of their return. Herod would, every now and then, tell his servants to go and watch from the top of the towers of his royal dwelling and see if they were in sight. He did not know that God had warned these good men not to come back by Jerusalem. Little did he think, when gazing thus impatiently for them from his palace windows, that the Magi, in obe-

dience to the Divine command, had already crossed the Jordan, and were traversing the valleys of Gilead, on their way to their Arabian homes.

When the king had ascertained that the wise men had deceived him, and that they had not done as he had ordered, he became in a great passion. He was accustomed to have his word promptly obeyed. His will was always law. Now that his commands were slighted, he would not brook the affront. The blood rose to his checks, the fire flashed in his eye, and he resolved on vengeance.

His fears, too, as you may believe, had greatly increased. He began to suspect, from the Magi not returning, that Balaam and Micah's prophecies had been too truly fulfilled ; that the Messiah-King had indeed been born in *Bethlehem-Ephratah* ; and that his crown and his throne are in danger.

What is the dark purpose he has formed in his mind ? He gathers his captains and leading officers about him, and tells them secretly of a horrible deed of blood.

He has determined to murder JESUS, the Infant King. If he succeed in doing so, his fears will

be at an end, and he need no longer dread a young rival to the Jewish throne. But as he does not know in what house at Bethlehem the child and his parents are, he issues the command that *all* the little infants in the city and its neighbourhood shall that night be put to the sword !

I daresay many of the brave and manly Roman soldiers who then stood around Herod, and listened to the dreadful mandate, would shudder at the thought of so many infant children cruelly perishing. A really brave heart always shrinks from doing injury to those who are innocent, or who cannot defend themselves.

But they know that they dare not resist the decree of their passionate master ; and Herod will doubtless take care to pick out a band of cruel and hard-hearted men, who will be glad to undertake the terrible task. "Kill every one of them," are his orders, "under two years of age. Let none be left."

You may imagine that company of cruel murderers setting out from the gates of Jerusalem on their way to *Bethlehem*. Little does many a mother, in that quiet and peaceful city, know

what in a brief hour she will be called to witness and endure.

In Bethlehem itself, and in the cottages and hamlets, perched in the midst of vineyards and olive-gardens round about, many happy little Hebrew children were that morning seen—some lying peacefully by their mother's side in their cradles—others playing about their mother's feet, or climbing on their father's knee before he went out to work. A few were even beginning to be taught to lisp the name of their father's God, and to sing some hymns or psalms to His praise. Their parents, as they gazed on their little faces, would think of them with pride as growing up to manhood, and say of them, "This same shall comfort us."

Suddenly a wild shriek rises from the streets and houses of *Bethlehem*. More faintly it is borne in the evening breeze from the villages around. Herod's savage wolves have broken in upon the innocent lambs of the fold. These same mothers who were seen in the morning sitting at their distaffs, and looking so happily on their lisping babes, are now rushing about the streets

in frantic grief, wringing their hands, tearing their hair, and beating their breasts, crying out, "Oh, my child! my child!" They implore the cruel soldiers to have mercy on the innocent. "Spare him," one is heard crying, "he is my only one; if you take him you take my all." "Spare him," another is heard saying, "he is my Benjamin, my best beloved; none are so dear to me as he!"

But all their pleadings, and tears, and cries are in vain. The iron soldiers of Herod are deaf to the voice of affection. Some mothers in that hour of terror have tried to flee from the sword of the murderers; some have rushed to the tops of their houses and concealed themselves there; others have fled to vaults under ground; others have tried to bar their dwellings; others have gone to the vineyards around and attempted to hide themselves there. But the cry of the terrified babes reveals their lurking place; escape is impossible; the door of every dwelling is broken open; every nook and corner is searched; and wherever a little child under two years of age is found, the heartless soldiers tear it from

the mother's embrace; the next moment it is in the embrace of death, its eyes closed and its marble lips sealed for ever!

Such a night there never was, since that similar cry which, 1500 years before, rose throughout all the land of Egypt; when in every Egyptian dwelling, from the Royal Palace of Memphis to the lowliest brick cottage in the kingdom, the eldest-born was found dead.

The word "BETHLEHEM," I have told you, in a former Chapter, means "*House of Bread*;" another meaning of it, however, is "*House of War*." This latter name is sadly true now. The blood of innocent children, like that of Abel of old, is crying from the ground. "*In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not*" (Matt. ii. 18).

Oh, what a change has in two brief days passed over "the little city." In our last chapters we assembled in thought with the Shepherds and the Magi around the infant cradle; we heard the sweet song of the Cherubim in the adjoining valley, with its notes of peace on earth and love

to men. Bethlehem, till this moment, is full of images of *peace*. Its story is a story of peace: The gleanings of Ruth in that bright harvest-field—the happiness of Naomi with her little grandson—the sweet harp of David sounding in its valleys—the Songs of the Shepherds, and the joy of the Wise Men. Amid its quiet pastoral hills, it seemed to be a befitting birth-place for the Infant *Prince of Peace*.

But now all is changed. Its streets are stained with blood, its homes are filled with broken hearts, and its burial-ground crowded with early graves.

The bloody deed is done. I think if Herod could not sleep the night before, still more dreadful dreams must have visited him now. During his miserable old age the thought of his horrible crime must have haunted him. The Bible says, “There is no peace to the wicked.” History tells us he built a grand palace for himself amid the palm forests of Jericho, and there closed his life. That dying pillow was one of thorns. In addition to the pangs of a guilty conscience, he died of a horrible disease in great torture.

But did this cruel king succeed in what was

his main object in ordering this terrible massacre? Was the Child of the Manger-Cradle killed along with the others?

No. He who has all events in His hand, had this Lion Herod in a chain. He would not suffer him to destroy "the Lamb of God."

The night before, a bright Angel appeared to Joseph when he was asleep on his pillow of straw in the stable, and said, "Do not wait another day, the Jewish king has a plot to murder the Infant Jesus. Arise, take Him and His mother, and depart into Egypt, and remain there till I bring you word from God, that it is safe to return."

Joseph did not delay a moment. He started up from his rude pillow, and while the moon and stars were shining, and all was hushed in the stillness of night, he saddled his ass, and putting Mary and the Child upon it, he led them out by the gate of the City. They were far on their way in the desert, which lay between Egypt and Palestine, when Herod's soldiers were marching from Jerusalem.

That little infant, who was nestling in its mother's arms in that solitary wilderness, would know all about the terrible scene that took place

next day in Bethlehem. Being Himself a babe, He would feel a deep sorrow for those little ones, who, upon His account, were so cruelly slain. It must have been, I think, the first sorrow of Him who, when He was grown up, was called by the touching name of "the Man of Sorrows."

What a beautiful thought for little children, when they have little sorrows of their own, into which older people cannot enter, that JESUS, who is now a great and glorious King in the skies, was once Himself a little infant child!

There is one other place and scene of which I must speak, before I close this chapter.

Up high in Heaven I think I see a little white-robed multitude. They have green palms in their hands and crowns on their heads, and they are singing joyful songs along with thousands of bright Angels.

Whence came they? Little children, safe within the walls of the new Jerusalem, come and tell us your strange story!

"We are the children of *Bethlehem*," they seem to reply. "A cruel king sent his soldiers to kill us when we were infants, but it only brought us

sooner to this happy Heaven. We are not sorry now that we died so young. If our fathers and mothers had only known our bliss they would not have shed so many bitter tears. Shining Angels bore us aloft on their wings to this glorious place. As we were ascending up amid the bright stars, they pointed down to a little child travelling through the desert, and said, ‘*That* is the Holy Infant whom the wicked king sought to kill. Though *your* bodies have been slain for *His* sake, *He* is to be slain for *your* sake. *He* is to give *Himself* up to death, that your souls may live and be happy for ever and ever!’”

Dear young readers, Have any of you a brother or sister who were taken away when they were infants by death? Do not weep for them. They are happier far than you could wish them or make them in this world. You can go and visit their little graves in the churchyard on earth, and write on their tombstones—

“**OF SUCH IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.**”

You can follow them in thought into the presence of Him who was once the Holy Child Jesus. You can think of them, as you repeat the follow-

ing beautiful hymn, joining in that bright world with the little children of BETHLEHEM and other redeemed infants, gathered in every age of the Church—

“ Around the throne of God in heaven
Ten thousand children stand,
Whose sins are all through Christ forgiven,
A holy, happy band.
Singing glory, glory, glory.

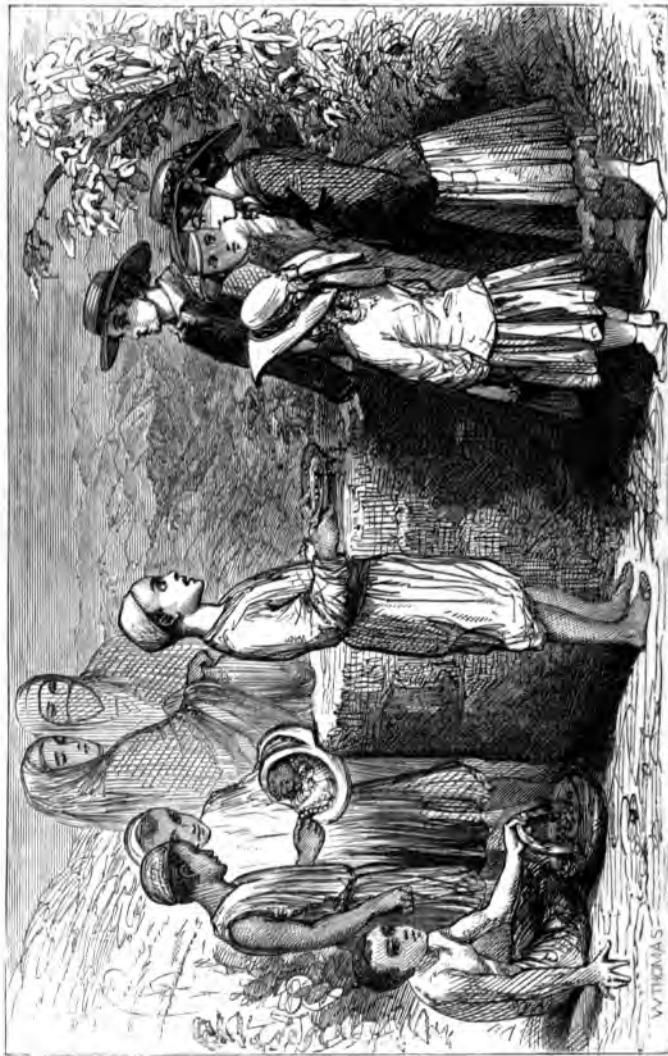
What brought them to that world above,
That heaven so bright and fair,
Where all is peace, and joy, and love,
How came those children there?
Singing glory, glory, glory.

Because the Saviour shed His blood
To wash away their sin ;
Bathed in that pure and precious flood,
Behold them white and clean.
Singing glory, glory, glory.

On earth they sought the Saviour’s grace,
On earth they loved His name ;
And now they see His blessed face,
And stand before the Lamb.
Singing glory, glory, glory.”

1





CHAPTER X.

STORY OF THE PRESENT.

ONE thousand eight hundred and fifty-eight years have elapsed since the date of my last sad chapter. I think many of my young readers who have become interested in this story will not be content that I finish my book without answering the question, '*What of BETHLEHEM now?*' Is there any story still to tell about the town of David? Does she still sit a little queen among the green hills? Are the walls still there, and the vineyards, and palms? Is David's old well sought for now in vain at the gate? And above all, is there anything to point to the spot where the lowly manger-cradle was, and where the shepherds and magi worshipped the new-born King?'

Come with me in thought on a visit to the hill country of Judea. I shall think of you as a

number of young pilgrims setting out from the far west, as the magi did from the far east, and saying with the shepherds of old, "*Let us go even unto Bethlehem.*"

We have reached the sacred spot. Yes, this is indeed the very city whose story I have been writing. While many other towns far grander and more populous have passed away, and are now nothing but a heap of ruins, Micah's "little city" still remains, with its 2800 inhabitants. The venerable old walls are still there, the green slopes and quiet valleys, the remains of the terraced vineyards, the almond groves and fig plantations, the towers and wine-presses. In early Spring the same flowers as of old carpet its valleys and meadows; the principal of these are a blaze of scarlet and crimson, which have received the touching name of "the Saviour's blood-drops." Yonder, too, in the far distance, are the great purple Moab mountains, flushed with the same tints as when the young Bethlehemite watched them on his father's knee from the top of his house, or from the craggy heights, with his sheep browsing around him.

The gate is gone, and also the palm trees, but

not so the old well of the heroes. There it is, with a cluster of little children still playing around it. Their mothers are washing close by, and drawing water with their pitchers and rope, just as Ruth was wont to do 3000 years ago when living in her lowly dwelling with Naomi, or as David himself did, for himself and his fleecy charge, when, wearied with his long day on the mountains, he returned home in the hot summer evening. A recent visitor describes it as an arched enclosure open at the sides. Twenty or thirty of these females were drawing water as he passed—young women and aged mothers, in dresses of varied colours. He asked for a drink of its water, and they gave it him in a skin pitcher.*

While our readers, or travellers, are standing by the well of David, or stooping over it, thinking, perhaps, of the three brave soldiers with their helmet cups, a number of children and youths come running from the city, most of them in white dresses, with smiling faces and baskets in their hands.

What can these little Bethlehem boys and girls wish?

Your first thought perhaps is that they have

* Bonar's Land of Promise, p. 108.

come to see a band of young pilgrims, who live far away beyond the great sea in the isles of Chittim, but who are said to love much the Hebrew nation; or you may think that they have come to hear your strange speech, see your strange dress, and stand and wonder at you, just as children are wont to do when strangers stand about their doors. But soon they explain their errand. One little girl puts her hand into her basket, and taking out a carved figure, says in her own language, accompanied by signs and gestures, "buy, buy." Another older boy, wearing a blue Arab cap, holds out a tray filled with agate and jasper found in the rocks around Bethlehem. How tempting they look! not so much for their own sake (for many more beautiful things you have seen in the shops in England or Scotland); but the thought comes into your mind, "Perhaps David's flocks or his own footsteps may have wandered over the very spot where these stones were found!"

Another girl opens her little store, and says, "Here is a necklace made of mother-of-pearl found in the Red Sea. Or here is one, richly carved, made of the wood and kernels of the

olives growing in the Valley of the Kedron, and in the Garden of Gethsemane."

"Here," says another boy, with a larger and costlier piece of work, "is a model in ivory and wood, of the Cave of the Nativity; or here is a figure of the Virgin Mary, and the Holy Child Jesus. And here again, are the three Eastern Kings kneeling down in the stable and presenting their gifts."

A younger little girl next comes up, with bright black eyes, and a smaller basket on her arm, with articles not so costly. She has beads made of olive-wood, and glass rings from Hebron, and plain cups and spoons made of the beech and terebinth growing around.

Perhaps our young travellers may not be able to purchase any of these toys and keep-sakes to bring home with them to Britain, as presents to their brothers and sisters; but at some particular seasons of the year, and especially at Easter (in the middle of April), when many thousands of pilgrims from all quarters of Europe, crowd to *Bethlehem*, these little trinket-sellers get quantities of their articles disposed of. Their fathers and mothers live entirely by this trade,—carving,

and often very beautifully, in wood, ivory, and mother-of-pearl.

But let us leave the Well of David and the little groups with their baskets, and enter within the walls of the Old City. Can it be! How strange the thought! that we are walking the same narrow streets that were trodden of old by Elimelech and Boaz, Ruth and David; that we are following the steps of the Wise Men and the Shepherds; and more than all, that we are drawing near the spot where Jesus the Son of God, our blessed, gracious Saviour was born !

I cannot tell whether the houses of Bethlehem are built now in the same way as in the days of Boaz and Jesse. I do not think that they can be very much altered. As our young pilgrims walk through the main street, they see the same flat-roofed dwellings I spoke about, as common of old. They are generally poor and mean. There are none at all suited to be the palace of Prince Nashon, or the abode of the wealthy Boaz. They are built partly of clay and partly of brick, a row of hives made of earthenware is generally found on their tops. Pleasant it is to hear the hum of the mountain bee,—the same sweet

music which fell of old on the ear of David, and was wont to mingle with the tones of his harp in his mountain solitude.

Proceeding along the main street, we come, at the eastern end of it, to a monster edifice built on the edge of the steep white rock, which looks down on the old corn-fields of Boaz. The building I speak of, resembles partly a church and partly a warlike fort or castle. The old Bethlehemite who conducts us to it, informs us, "Here is the Convent of the Holy Nativity. It is erected over the Stable and Manger where the Saviour of the world was born."

As my young pilgrim-travellers are gazing upon this strange mass of buildings, and wondering where the humble stable and manger they expected to find can be, I shall tell you its history.

The Empress Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, was a good and holy Queen. She loved the Lord Jesus Christ as her Saviour. She is one of those of whom Isaiah prophesies in future ages of the Church, when he says, "Kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and *Queens thy nursing mothers*" (Isa. xlix. 23). She had a

great deal of wealth, and the thought came one day into her mind, “I should like, with the treasures of gold and silver with which God has favoured me, to build a beautiful Church over the Manger and Stable where my Great Redeemer was born.”

Perhaps the stable had been falling into decay, or rude hands had been destroying it and pulling it to pieces. She regarded it as very holy ground, which she would like to protect and honour.

Just as many in every age of the world have had a natural pleasure in placing monuments over the graves of those they love, she wished to shew her love to the Lord Jesus, by putting a great monument over the sacred spot which formed His birthplace.

In process of time, however, what was once a simple church was greatly added to. A large, irregular convent and fortress was built all round, with high walls and strong gates. The church, too, was greatly beautified. Its roof was made of beams of cedar from Lebanon. Its walls were richly adorned with mosaics and precious stones ; costly gold and silver lamps were sent as pre-

sents from kings and princes, and hung with chains from the roof. It must, in the middle ages, have been a wondrously gorgeous building, with its glittering gold and various-coloured marbles. Now its ornaments are much faded and defaced. Moreover, what originally was a token of the piety of a Christian Queen became disfigured with follies and superstitions.

It may interest my young readers to know that when the roof of this church was last repaired, it was not done as formerly, with cedars from Mount Lebanon, but our own King Edward IV. sent some sturdy oak-rafters from his royal forests in England.

Let us go, however, and inspect the building for ourselves.

There is only one way of getting into it, by a strong massive iron door. Our young pilgrims can enter without stooping; but the old guide has to bend his head before he can get through. It is said the gate was made thus low to prevent the wild Arabs of the middle ages riding in for plunder.

We proceed along a winding passage and stair cut out of the white limestone, and dimly lighted

with silver lamps and olive oil. At last we have reached a cave or recess in the wall, twenty feet below the church. It is called *the Grotto of the Nativity*. We approach it by descending some marble steps. The cavern I speak of is completely covered with pictures, draperies, and other ornaments, some of them poor and trifling. We see numbers of pilgrims from all parts of the world kneeling on a marble pavement, under burning lamps and tapers. The figure of a star is in the centre of the pavement. It is composed of a spot of white marble inlaid with jasper, and silver beams proceeding from it, with the Latin words round about it—

• “HERE WAS JESUS CHRIST BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY.”

In front there is a table or altar, also of marble, and golden lamps kept burning night and day above it.

The pilgrims have visited most of them for the first time. Their hearts are full of the greatest of all Bethlehem stories—the coming of the Lord of glory as a little babe, to a manger-cradle. I believe most of them feel sad and sorry when they see the holy spot of the Saviour’s birth so

disfigured and dishonoured with these gaudy ornaments. How far more interesting would the visit to Bethlehem be, if the simple village had been allowed to remain as it was, and if neither silver, nor gold, nor marble, had spoiled the touching simplicity of the cradle and the manger. Nevertheless, when they descend to what is pointed out as the very cave where He lay,—when they see the sign of the star and the supposed manger—they cannot resist the sacredness of the spot. They fall on their knees, and, with tears rolling down their cheeks, kiss the pavement, and then gaze on the hollow cavern with wonder, and awe, and love!

After all, there is the greatest possible ground for doubt whether the spot thus shewn be really where the manger was. It is not likely that the stable of the *khan* or public inn would be a cave under ground.

All travellers, however, agree that there is one spot in this vast convent whose interest these foolish superstitions have not destroyed.

One of the holiest and best of the fathers of the ancient Church was *St Jerome*. Like good Queen Helena, he, too, loved the Lord Jesus very

much. He gave up his life entirely to His service, and resolved to spend the remainder of it close by the stable and manger where his Blessed Lord was born.

He accordingly came to Palestine, and took up his abode in a cave or cell, which is still shewn within the convent. However great may be the doubts connected with the reality of other things shewn there, there can be none regarding that rough chamber hewn out of the rock, which is pointed out as the very spot where this holy and devoted man lived and prayed for thirty years. In that remote cell, close by the most sacred spot on earth, he translated the Holy Scriptures into Latin, and died at the advanced age of ninety years. His body was wasted by fasting, but to the last he was “strong in faith, giving glory to God.”

And now we must bid BETHLEHEM and its many stories farewell. It may yet have a happier story to tell in the future, when prophecy is fulfilled ; when the Jewish nation—the children of Ruth and David—shall return to their own land ; and, bringing with them offerings better

than those of the Magi—the offerings of gratitude and love—will own the Infant of the lowly manger as their Messiah-King, saying, “*Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!*”

Who does not love to think of the children of Abraham, in coming years, waking with their voices the echoes of the old valleys of David in sweet songs of praise to Jesus, the TRUE KING OF THE JEWS!

I have been speaking, in this last chapter, of the little children of *Bethlehem*, who at the present day are seen running with strings of pearls and beads in their hands, offering them to the pilgrims who crowd its streets.

Young reader, in closing my story, here is a string of pearls to take away with you. Here are keepsakes which the great God himself offers you. Take and wear them on your heart of hearts:—

“I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me” (Prov. viii. 17).

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (Eccles. xii. 1).

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. xi. 28).

“But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. xix. 14).

“Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” (Matt. xviii. 14).

Take one parting look at that wondrous manger, and, gazing on HIM who gives it all its glory, be it yours to say—

“I long to be *like* Jesus,
Meek, lowly, loving, mild ;
I long to be like Jesus,
The Father’s holy child.

I long to be *with* Jesus,
Amid the heavenly throng,
To sing with Saints His praises,
To learn the Angels’ song,”

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